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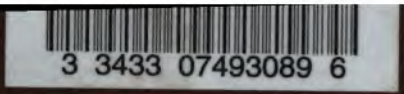
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ROBBERY UNDER ARMS BY ROLF BOLDERWOOD.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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ROBBERY UNDER ARMS

A STORY

OF LIFE AND ADVENTURE
IN THE BUSH AND IN THE GOLDFIELDS
OF AUSTRALIA

BY

ROLF BOLDERWOOD.

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IN TWO VOLUMES.—VOL. I.

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ROBBERY UNDER ARMS.

CHAPTER I.

My name's Dick Marston, Sydney-side native. I'm twenty-nine years old, six feet in my stocking soles, and thirteen stone weight. Pretty strong and active with it, so they say. I don't want to blow—not here, any road—but it takes a good man to put me on my back, or stand up to me with the gloves, or the naked mauleys. I can ride anything—anything that ever was lapped in horsehide—swim like a musk-duck, and track like a Myall blackfellow. Most things that a man can do I'm up to, and that's all about it. As I lift myself now I can feel the muscle swell on my arm like a cricket ball, in spite of the—well, in spite of everything.

The morning sun comes shining through the window bars; and ever since he was up have I been cursing the daylight, cursing myself, and them that brought me into the world. Did I curse mother, and the hour I was born into this miserable life?

Why should I curse the day? Why do I lie here, groaning; yes, crying like a child, and beating my head against *the stone floor?* I am not mad, though I am shut

up in a cell. No. Better for me if I was. But it's all up now; there's no get away this time; and I, Dick Marston, as strong as a bullock, as active as a rock-wallaby, chock-full of life and spirits and health, have been tried for bushranging—robbery under arms they call it—and though the blood runs through my veins like the water in the mountain creeks, and every bit of bone and sinew is as sound as the day I was born, I must die on the gallows this day month.

Die—die—yes, die; be strung up like a dog, as they say. I'm blessed if ever I did know of a dog being hanged, though, if it comes to that, a shot or a bait generally makes an end of 'em in this country. Ha, ha! Did I laugh? What a rum thing it is that a man should have a laugh in him when he's only got twenty-nine days more to live—a day for every year of my life. Well, laughing or crying, this is what it has come to at last. All the drinking and recklessness; the flash talk and the idle ways; the merry cross-country rides that we used to have, night or day, it made no odds to us; every man well mounted, as like as not on a racehorse in training taken out of his stable within the week; the sharp brushes with the police, when now and then a man was wounded on each side, but no one killed. That came later on, worse luck. The jolly sprees we used to have in the bush townships, where we chucked our money about like gentlemen, where all the girls had a smile and a kind word for a lot of game upstanding chaps, that acted like men, if they did keep the road a little lively. Our "bush telegraphs" were safe to let us know when the "traps" were closing in on us, and then—why the coach would be "stuck up" a hundred miles away, in a different direction, *within* twenty-four hours. Marston's gang again! The

police are in pursuit! That's what we'd see in the papers. We had 'em sent to us regular; besides having the pick of 'em when we cut open the mail bags.

And now—that chain rubbed a sore, curse it!—all that racket's over. It's more than hard to die in this settled, infernal, fixed sort of way, like a bullock in the killing-yard, all ready to be "pithed." I used to pity them when I was a boy, walking round the yard, pushing their noses through the rails, trying for a likely place to jump, stamping and pawing and roaring and knocking their heads against the heavy close rails, with misery and rage in their eyes, till their time was up. Nobody told *them* beforehand, though!

Have I and the likes of me ever felt much the same, I wonder, shut up in a pen like this, with the rails up, and not a place a rat could creep through, waiting till our killing time was come? The poor devils of steers have never done anything but ramble off the run now and again, while we—but it's too late to think of that. It *is* hard. There's no saying it isn't; no, nor thinking what a fool, what a blind, stupid, thundering idiot a fellow's been, to laugh at the steady working life that would have helped him up, bit by bit, to a good farm, a good wife, and innocent little kids about him, like that chap, George Storefield, that came to see me last week. He was real rightdown sorry for me, I could tell, though Jim and I used to laugh at him, and call him a regular old crawler of a milker's calf in the old days. The tears came into his eyes reg'lar like a woman as he gave my hand a squeeze and turned his head away. We was little chaps together, you know. A man always feels that, you know. And old George, he'll go back—a fifty-mile ride, but what's that on a good horse? He'll be late home, but

he can cross the rock ford the short way over the creek. I can see him turn his horse loose at the garden gate, and walk through the quinces that lead up to the cottage, with his saddle on his arm. Can't I see it all, as plain as if I was there!

And his wife and the young 'uns 'll run out when they hear father's horse, and want to hear all the news. When he goes in there's his meal tidy and decent waiting for him, while he tells them about the poor chap he's been to see as is to be scragged next month. Ha! ha! what a rum joke it is, isn't it?

And then he'll go out in the verandah, with the roses growin' all over the posts and smellin' sweet in the cool night air. After that he'll have his smoke, and sit there thinkin' about me, perhaps, and old days, and what not, till all hours—till his wife comes and fetches him in. And here I lie—my God! why didn't they knock me on the head when I was born, like a lamb in a dry season, or a blind puppy—blind enough, God knows! They do so in some countries, if the books say true, and what a hell of misery that must save some people from!

Well, it's done now, and there's no get away. I may as well make the best of it. A sergeant of police was shot in out last scrimmage, and they must fit someone over that. It's only natural. He was rash, or Starlight would never have dropped him that day. Not if he'd been sober either. We'd been drinking all night at that Willow Tree shanty. Bad grog, too! When a man's half drunk he's fit for any devilment that comes before him. Drink! How do you think a chap that's taken to the bush—regularly turned out, I mean, with a price on his head, and a fire burning in his heart night and day—*can stand* his life if he don't drink? When he thinks of

what he might have been, and what he is! Why, nearly every man he meets is paid to run him down, or trap him some way like a stray dog that's taken to sheep-killin'. He knows a score of men, and women, too, that are only looking out for a chance to sell his blood on the quiet and pouch the money. Do you think that makes a chap mad and miserable, and tired of his life, or not? And if a drop of grog will take him right out of his wretched self for a bit why shouldn't he drink? People don't know what they are talking about. Why, he is that miserable, that he wonders why he don't hang himself, and save the Government all the trouble; and if a few nobblers make him feel as if he might have some good chances yet, and that it doesn't so much matter after all, why shouldn't he drink?

He does drink, of course; every miserable man, and a good many women, as have something to fear or repent of, drink. The worst of it is that too much of it brings on the "horrors," and then the devil, instead of giving you a jog now and then, sends one of his imps to grin in your face and pull your heartstrings all day and all night long. By George, I'm getting clever—too clever, altogether, I think. If I could forget for one moment, in the middle of all the nonsense, that I was to die on Thursday three weeks! die on Thursday three weeks! die on Thursday! That's the way the time runs in my ears like a chime of bells. But it's all mere bosh I've been reading these long six months I've been chained up here —after I was committed for trial. When I came out of the hospital after curing me of that wound—for I was hit bad by that black tracker—they gave me some books to read for fear I'd go mad and cheat the hangman. I was always fond of reading, and many a night I've read to

poor old mother and Aileen before I left the old place. I was that weak and low, after I took the turn, and I felt glad to get a book to take me away from sitting, staring, and blinking at nothing by the hour together. It was all very well then; I was too weak to think much. But when I began to get well again I kept always coming across something in the book that made me groan or cry out, as if someone had stuck a knife in me. A dark chap did once—through the ribs—it didn't feel so bad, a little sharpish at first; why didn't he aim a bit higher? He never was no good, even at that. As I was saying, there'd be something about a horse, or the country, or the spring weather—it's just coming in now, and the Indian corn's shooting after the rain, and *I'll* never see it; or they'd put in a bit about the cows walking through the river in the hot summer afternoons; or they'd go describing about a girl, until I began to think of sister Aileen again; then I'd run my head against the wall, or do something like a madman, and they'd stop the books for a week; and I'd be as miserable as a bandicoot, worse and worse a lot, with all the devil's tricks and bad thoughts in my head, and nothing to put them away.

I must either kill myself, or get something to fill up my time till the day—yes, the day comes. I've always been a middling writer, tho' I can't say much for the grammar, and spelling, and that, but I'll put it all down, from the beginning to the end, and maybe it'll save some other unfortunate young chap from pulling back like a colt when he's first roped, setting himself against everything in the way of proper breaking, making a fool of himself generally, and choking himself down, as I've done.

The gaoler—he looks hard—he has to do that, there's *more* than one or two within here that would have him

by the throat, with his heart's blood running, in half a minute, if they had their way, and the warder was off guard. He knows that very well. But he's not a bad-hearted chap.

"You can have books, or paper and pens, anything you like," he said, "you unfortunate young beggar, until you're turned off."

"If I'd only had you to see after me when I was young," says I—

"Come; don't whine," he said, then he burst out laughing. "You didn't mean it, I see. I ought to have known better. You're not one of that sort, and I like you all the better for it."

* * * * * *

Well, here goes. Lots of pens, a big bottle of ink, and ever so much foolscap paper, the right sort for me, or I shouldn't have been here. I'm blessed if it doesn't look as if I was going to write copies again. Don't I remember how I used to go to school in old times; the rides there and back on the old pony; and pretty little Grace Storefield that I was so fond of, and used to show her how to do her lessons. I believe I learned more that way than if I'd had only myself to think about. There was another girl, the daughter of the poundkeeper, that I wanted her to beat; and the way we both worked, and I coached her up, was a caution. And she did get above her in her class. How proud we were! She gave me a kiss, too, and a bit of her hair. Poor Gracey! I wonder where she is now, and what she'd think if she saw me here to-day. If I could have looked ahead, and seen myself—chained now like a dog, and going to die a dog's death this day month!

Anyhow, I must *make* a start. How do people begin

when they set to work to write their own sayings and doings? There's been a deal more doing than talking in my life—it was the wrong sort—more's the pity.

Well, let's see; his parents were poor, but respectable. That's what they always say. My parents were poor, and mother was as good a soul as ever broke bread, and wouldn't have taken a shilling's worth that wasn't her own if she'd been starving. But as for father, he'd been a poacher in England, a Lincolnshire man he was, and got sent out for it. He wasn't much more than a boy, he said, and it was only for a hare or two, which didn't seem much. But I begin to think, being able to see the right of things a bit now, and having no bad grog inside of me to turn a fellow's head upside down, as poaching must be something like cattle and horse duffing—not the worst thing in the world itself, but mighty likely to lead to it.

Dad had always been a hard-working, steady-going sort of chap, good at most things, and like a lot more of the Government men, as the convicts were always called round our part, he saved some money as soon as he had done his time, and married mother, who was a simple emigrant girl just out from Ireland. Father was a square-built, good-looking chap, I believe, then; not so tall as I am by three inches, but wonderfully strong and quick on his pins. They did say as he could hammer any man in the district before he got old and stiff. I never saw him "shape" but once, and then he rolled into a man big enough to eat him, and polished him off in a way that showed me—though I was a bit of a boy then—that he'd been at the game before. He didn't ride so bad either, though he hadn't had much of it where he *came from; but* he was afraid of nothing, and had a quiet

way with colts. He could make pretty good play in thick country, and ride a roughish horse, too.

Well, our farm was on a good little flat, with a big mountain in front, and a scrubby, rangy country at the back for miles. People often asked him why he chose such a place. "It suits me," he used to say, with a laugh, and talk of something else. We could only raise about enough corn and potatoes, in a general way, for ourselves from the flat; but there were other chances and pickings which helped to make the pot boil, and them we'd have been a deal better without.

First of all, though our cultivation paddock was small, and the good land seemed squeezed in between the hills, there was a narrow track up the creek, and here it widened out into a large, well-grassed flat. This was where our cattle ran, for, of course, we had a team of workers and a few milkers when we came. No one ever took up a farm in those days without a dray and a team, a year's rations, a few horses and milkers, pigs and fowls, and a little furniture. They didn't collar a 40-acre selection, as they do now—spend all their money in getting the land and squat down as bare as robins—a man with his wife and children all under a sheet of bark, nothing on their backs, and very little in their bellies. However, some of them do pretty well, though they do say they have to live on 'possums for a time. We didn't do much, in spite of our grand start.

The flat was well enough, but there were other places in the gullies beyond that that father had dropped upon when he was out shooting. He was a tremendous chap for poking about on foot or on horseback, and though he was an Englishman, he was what you call a born bushman. I never saw any man almost as was his equal,

Wherever he'd been once, there he could take you t again; and what was more, if it was in the dead of th night he could do it just the same. People said he wa as good as a blackfellow, but I never saw one that was q good as he was, all round. In a strange country, t That was what beat me—he'd know the way the cre run, and noticed when the cattle headed to camp, and lot of things that other people couldn't see, or if th did, couldn't remember again. He was a great man solitary walks, too—he and an old dog he had, call Crib, a cross-bred mongrel-looking brute, most like wh they call a lurcher in England, father said. Anyhow, could do most anything but talk. He could bite to some purpose, drive cattle or sheep, catch a kangaroo, if it wasn't a regular flyer, fight like a bulldog, and swim like a retriever, track anything, and fetch and carry, but bark he wouldn't. He'd stand and look at dad as if he worshipped him, and he'd make him some sign and off he'd go like a child that's got a message. Why he was so fond of the old man we boys couldn't make out. We were afraid of him, and as far as we could see he never patted or made much of Crib. He thrashed him unmerciful as he did us boys. Still the dog was that fond of him you'd think he'd like to die for him there and then. But dogs are not like boys, or men either—better, perhaps.

Well, we were all born at the hut by the creek, I suppose, for I remember it as soon as I could remember anything. It was a snug hut enough, for father was a good bush carpenter, and didn't turn his back to anyone for splitting and fencing, hut-building and shingle-splitting; he had had a year or two at sawing, too, but after he *was married* he dropped that. But I've heard mother

say that he took great pride in the hut when he brought her to it first, and said it was the best-built hut within fifty miles. He split every slab, cut every post and wall-plate and rafter himself, with a man to help him at odd times; and after the frame was up, and the bark on the roof, he camped underneath and finished every bit of it—chimney, flooring, doors, windows, and partitions—by himself. Then he dug up a little garden in front, and planted a dozen or two peaches and quinces in it; put a couple of roses—a red and a white one—by the posts of the verandah, and it was all ready for his pretty Norah, as she says he used to call her then. If I've heard her tell about the garden and the quince trees and the two roses once, I've heard her tell it a hundred times. Poor mother! we used to get round her—Aileen, and Jim, and I—and say, "Tell us about the garden, mother." She'd never refuse; those were her happy days, she always said. She used to cry afterwards—nearly always.

The first thing almost that I can remember was riding the old pony, 'Possum, out to bring in the milkers. Father was away somewhere, so mother took us all out and put me on the pony, and let me have a whip. Aileen walked alongside, and very proud I was. My legs stuck out straight on the old pony's fat back. Mother had ridden him up when she came—the first horse she ever rode, she said. He was a quiet little old roan, with a bright eye and legs like gate-posts, but he never fell down with us boys, for all that. If we fell off he stopped still and began to feed, so that he suited us all to pieces. We soon got sharp enough to flail him along with a quince stick, and we used to bring up the milkers, I expect, a good deal faster than was good for them. After a bit we could milk, leg-rope, and bail up for ourselves, and

help dad brand the calves, which began to come pretty thick. There were only three of us children—my brother Jim, who was two years younger than I was, and then Aileen, who was four years behind him. I know we were both able to nurse the baby awhile after she came, and neither of us wanted better fun than to be allowed to watch her, or rock the cradle, or as a great treat to carry her a few steps. Somehow we was that fond and proud of her from the first that we'd have done anything in the world for her. And so we would now—I was going to say —but that poor Jim lies under a forest oak on a sandhill, and I—well, I'm here, and if I'd listened to her advice I should have been a free man. A free man! How it sounds, doesn't it? with the sun shining, and the blue sky over your head, and the birds twittering, and the grass beneath your feet! I wonder if I shall go mad before my time's up.

Mother was a Roman Catholic—most Irishwomen are; and dad was Protestant, if he was anything. However, that says nothing. People that don't talk much about their religion, or follow it up at all, won't change it for all that. So father, though mother tried him hard enough when they were first married, wouldn't hear of turning, not if he was to be killed for it, as I once heard him say. "No!" he says, "my father and grandfather, and all the lot, was church people, and so I shall live and die. I don't know as it would make much matter to me, but such as my notions is, I shall stick to 'em as long as the craft holds together. You can bring up the girl in your own way; it's made a good woman of you, or found you one, which is most likely, and so she may take her chance. But I stand for Church and King, and so shall the boys, as sure as my name's Ben Marstone."

CHAPTER II.

FATHER was one of those people that gets shut of a deal of trouble in this world by always sticking to one thing. If he said he'd do this or that he always did it and nothing else. As for turning him, a wild bull half-way down a range was a likelier try-on. So nobody ever bothered him after he'd once opened his mouth. They knew it was so much lost labour. I sometimes thought Aileen was a bit like him in her way of sticking to things. But then she was always right, you see.

So that clinched it. Mother gave in like a wise woman, as she was. The clergyman from Bargo came one day and christened me and Jim—made one job of it. But mother took Aileen herself in the spring cart all the way to the township and had her christened in the chapel, in the middle of the service all right and regular, by Father Roche.

There's good and bad of every sort, and I've met plenty that were no chop of all churches; but if Father Roche, or Father anybody else, had any hand in making mother and Aileen half as good as they were, I'd turn to-morrow, if I ever got out again. I don't suppose it was the religion that made much difference in our case, for Patsey Daly and his three brothers, that lived on the creek higher up, were as much on the cross as men could be, and many a time I've seen them ride to chapel and attend mass, and look as if they'd never seen a "clear skin" in their lives. Patsey was hanged afterwards for bush-ranging and gold robbery, and he had more than one man's blood to answer for. Now we weren't like that; we never troubled the church one way or the other.

We knew we were doing what we oughtn't to do, and scorned to look pious and keep two faces under one hood.

By degrees we all grew older, began to be active and able to do half a man's work. We learned to ride pretty well—at least, that is we could ride a bare-backed horse at full gallop through timber or down a range; could back a colt just caught and have him as quiet as an old cow in a week. We could use the axe and the cross-cut saw, for father dropped that sort of work himself, and made Jim and I do all the rough jobs of mending the fences, getting firewood, milking the cows, and, after a bit, ploughing the bit of flat we kept in cultivation.

Jim and I, when we were fifteen and thirteen—he was bigger for his age than I was, and so near my own strength that I didn't care about touching him—were the smartest lads on the creek, father said—he didn't often praise us, either. We had often ridden over to help at the muster of the large cattle stations that were on the side of the range, and not more than twenty or thirty miles from us.

Some of our young stock used to stray among the squatters' cattle, and we liked attending the muster because there was plenty of galloping about and cutting out, and fun in the men's hut at night, and often a half-crown or so for helping someone away with a big mob of cattle or a lot for the pound. Father didn't go himself, and I used to notice that whenever we came up and said we were Ben Marston's boys both master and super looked rather glum, and then appeared not to think any more about it. I heard the owner of one of these stations say to his managing man, "Pity, isn't it? fine boys, too." I did'nt understand what they meant. I do now.

We could do a few things besides riding, because, as

I told you before, we had been to a bit of a school kept by an old chap that had once seen better days, that lived three miles off, near a little bush township. This village, like most of these places, had a public-house and a blacksmith's shop. That was about all. The publican kept the store, and managed pretty well to get hold of all the money that was made by the people round about, that is of those that were "good drinking men." He had half-a-dozen children, and, though he was not up to much, he wasn't that bad that he didn't want his children to have the chance of being better than himself. I've seen a good many crooked people in my day, but very few that, though they'd given themselves up as a bad job, didn't hope a bit that their youngsters mightn't take after them. Curious, isn't it? But it is true, I can tell you. So Lammerby, the publican, though he was a greedy, sly sort of fellow, that bought things he knew were stolen, and lent out money and charged everybody two prices for the things he sold 'em, didn't like the thought of his children growing up like Myall cattle, as he said himself, and so he fished out this old Mr. Howard, that had been a friend or a victim or some kind of pal of his in old times, near Sydney, and got him to come and keep school.

He was a curious man, this Mr. Howard. What he had been or done none of us ever knew, but he spoke up to one of the squatters that said something sharp to him one day in a way that showed us boys that he thought himself as good as he was. And he stood up straight and looked him in the face, till we hardly could think he was the same man that was so bent and shambling and broken-down-looking most times. He used to live in a little hut in the township all by himself. It was just big *enough to* hold him and us at our lessons.

He had his dinner at the inn, along with Mr. and Mrs. Lammerby. She was always kind to him, and made him puddings and things when he was ill. He was pretty often ill, and then he'd hear us our lessons at the bedside, and make a short day of it.

Mostly he drank nothing but tea. He used to smoke a good deal out of a big meerschaum pipe with figures on it that he used to show us when he was in a good humour. But two or three times a year he used to set-to and drink for a week, and then school was left off till he was right. We didn't think much of that. Everybody, almost, that we knew did the same—all the men —nearly all, that is—and some of the women—not mother, though; she wouldn't have touched a drop of wine or spirits to save her life, and never did to her dying day. We just thought of it as if they'd got a touch of fever or sunstroke, or broke a rib or something. They'd get over it in a week or two, and be all right again.

All the same poor old Mr. Howard wasn't always on the booze, not by any manner of means. He never touched a drop of anything, not even gingerbeer, while he was straight, and he kept us all going from nine o'clock in the morning till three in the afternoon, summer and winter, for more than six years. Then he died, poor old chap—found dead in his bed one morning. Many a basting he gave me and Jim with an old malacca cane he had with a silver knob to it. We were all pretty frightened of him. He'd say to me and Jim and the other boys, "It's the best chance of making men of yourselves you ever had, if you only knew it. You'll be rich farmers or settlers, perhaps magistrates, one of these days —*that is, if* you're not hanged. It's you, I mean," he'd

say, pointing to me and Jim and the Dalys; "I believe some of you *will* be hanged unless you change a good deal. It's cold blood and bad blood that runs in your veins, and you'll come to earn the wages of sin some day. It's a strange thing," he used to say, as if he was talking to himself, "that the girls are so good, while the boys are delivered over to the Evil One, except a case here and there. Look at Mary Darcy and Jane Lammerby, and my little pet Aileen here. I defy any village in Britain to turn out such girls—plenty of rosy-cheeked gigglers—but the natural refinement and intelligence of these little damsels astonishes me."

Well, the old man died suddenly, as I said, and we were all very sorry, and the school was broken up. But he had taught us all to write fairly and to keep accounts, to read and spell decently, and to know a little geography. It wasn't a great deal, but what we knew we knew well, and I often think of what he said, now it's too late, we ought to have made better use of it. After school broke up father said Jim and I knew quite as much as was likely to be any good to us, and we must work for our living like other people. We'd always done a pretty fair share of that, and our hands were hard with using the axe and the spade, let alone holding the plough at odd times and harrowing, helping father to kill and brand, and a lot of other things, besides getting up while the stars were in the sky so as to get the cows milked early, before it was time to go to school.

All this time we had lived in a free kind of way—we wanted for nothing. We had plenty of good beef, and a calf now and then. About this time I began to wonder how it was that so many cattle and horses passed through father's hands, and what became of them.

I hadn't lived all my life on Rocky Creek and among some of the smartest hands in that line that old New South Wales ever bred without knowing what "clear-skins" and "cross" beasts meant, and being well aware that our brand was often put on a calf that no cow of ours ever suckled. Don't I remember well the first calf I ever helped to put our letters on? I've often wished I'd defied father, then taken my licking, and bolted away from home. It's that very calf and the things it led to that's helped to put me where I am!

Just as I sit here, and these cursed irons rattle whenever I move my feet, I can see that very evening, and father and the old dog with a little mob of our crawling cattle and half-a-dozen head of strangers, cows and calves, and a fat little steer coming through the scrub to the old stockyard.

It was an awkward place for a yard, people used to say; scrubby and stony all round, a blind sort of hole—you couldn't see till you were right on the top of it. But there was a "wing" ran out a good way through the scrub—there's no better guide to a yard like that—and there was a sort of track cattle followed easy enough once you were round the hill. Anyhow, between father and the dog and the old mare he always rode, very few beasts ever broke away.

These strange cattle had been driven a good way, I could see. The cows and calves looked done up, and the steer's tongue was out—it was hottish weather; the old dog had been "heeling" him up too, for he was bleeding up to the hocks, and the end of his tail was bitten off. He was a savage old wretch was Crib. Like all dogs that never bark—and men too—his bite was all *the worse.*

"Go and get the brands—confound you—don't stand there frightening the cattle," says father, as the tired cattle after smelling and jostling a bit rushed into the yard. "You, Jim, make a fire, and look sharp about it. I want to brand old Polly's calf and another or two." Father came down to the hut while the brands were getting ready, and began to look at the harness cask, which stood in a little back skillion. It was pretty empty; we had been living on eggs, bacon, and bread and butter for a week.

"Oh, mother! there's such a pretty red calf in the yard," I said, "with a star and a white spot on the flank; and there's a yellow steer fat enough to kill!"

"What!" said mother, turning round and looking at father with her eyes staring—a sort of dark blue they were—people used to say mine and Jim's were the same colour—and her brown hair pushed back off her face, as if she was looking at a ghost. "Is it doing that again you are, after all you promised me, and you so nearly caught—after the last one? Didn't I go on my knees to ye to ask ye to drop it and lead a good life, and didn't ye tell me ye'd never do the like again? And the poor innocent children, too, I wonder ye've the heart to do it."

It came into my head now to wonder why the sergeant and two policemen had come down from Bargo, very early in the morning, about three months ago, and asked father to show them the beef in his cask, and the hide belonging to it. I wondered at the time the beast was killed why father made the hide into a rope, and before he did that had cut out the brand and dropped it into a hot fire. The police saw a hide with our brand on, all right—killed about a fortnight. They didn't know it had been taken *off a* cancered bullock, and that father

took the trouble to "stick" him and bleed him before he took the hide off, so as it shouldn't look dark. Father certainly knew most things in the way of working on the cross. I can see now he'd have made his money a deal easier, and no trouble of mind, if he'd only chosen to go straight.

When mother said this, father looked at her for a bit as if he was sorry for it; then he straightened himself up, and an ugly look came into his face as he growled out —

"You mind your own business, we must live as well as other people. There's squatters here that does as bad. They're just like the squires at home; think a poor man hasn't a right to live. You bring the brand and look alive, Dick, or I'll sharpen ye up a bit."

The brand was in the corner, but mother got between me and it, and stretched out her hand to father as if to stop me and him.

"In God's name," she cried out, "aren't ye satisfied with losing your own soul and bringing disgrace upon your family, but ye must be the ruin of your innocent children? Don't touch the brand, Dick!"

But father wasn't a man to be crossed, and what made it worse he had a couple of glasses of bad grog in him. There was an old villain of a shanty-keeper that lived on a back creek. He'd been there as he came by and had a glass or two. He had a regular savage temper, father had, though he was quiet enough and not bad to us when he was right. But the grog always spoiled him.

He gave poor mother a shove which sent her reeling against the wall, where she fell down and hit her head against the stool, and lay there. Aileen, sitting down in *the corner,* turned white, and began to cry, while father

catches me a box on the ear which sends me kicking, picks up the brand out of the corner, and walks out, with me after him.

I think if I'd been another year or so older I'd have struck back—I felt that savage about poor mother that I could have gone at him myself—but we had been too long used to do everything he told us; and somehow, even if a chap's father's a bad one, he don't seem like other men to him. So, as Jim had lighted the fire, we branded the little red heifer calf first—a fine fat six months old nugget she was—and then three bull calves, all strangers, and then Polly's calf, I suppose just for a blind. Jim and I knew the four calves were all strangers, but we didn't know the brands of the mothers; they all seemed different.

After this all was made right to kill a beast. The gallows was ready rigged in a corner of the yard; father brought his gun and shot the yellow steer. The calves were put into our calf-pen—Polly's and all—and all the cows turned out to go where they liked.

We helped father to skin and hang up the beast, and pretty late it was when we finished. Mother had laid us out our tea and gone to bed with Aileen. We had ours and then went to bed. Father sat outside and smoked in the starlight. Hours after I woke up and heard mother crying. Before daylight we were up again, and the steer was cut up and salted and in the harness-cask soon after sunrise. His head and feet were all popped into a big pot where we used to make soup for the pigs, and by the time it had been boiling an hour or two there was no fear of anyone swearing to the yellow steer by "head-mark."

We had *a hearty breakfast* off the "skirt," but mother

wouldn't touch a bit, nor let Aileen take any; she took nothing but a bit of bread and a cup of tea, and sat there looking miserable and downcast. Father said nothing, but sat very dark-looking, and ate his food as if nothing was the matter. After breakfast he took his mare, the old dog followed; there was no need to whistle for him—it's my belief he knew more than many a Christian—and away they went. Father didn't come home for a week—he had got into the habit of staying away for days and days together. Then things went on the old way.

CHAPTER III.

So the years went on—slow enough they seemed to us sometimes—the green winters, pretty cold, I tell you, with frost and hail-storms, and the long hot summers. We were not called boys any longer, except by mother and Aileen, but took our places among the men of the district. We lived mostly at home, in the old way; sometimes working pretty hard, sometimes doing very little. When the cows were milked and the wood chopped, there was nothing to do for the rest of the day. The creek was that close that mother used to go and dip the bucket into it herself, when she wanted one, from a little wooden step above the clear reedy waterhole.

Now and then, we used to dig in the garden. There was reaping and corn-pulling and husking for part of the year; but often, for weeks at a time, there was next to nothing to do. No hunting worth much—we were sick of kangarooing, like the dogs themselves, that as they grew old would run a little way and then pull up if a *mob came,* jump, jump, past them. No shooting, except

a few ducks and pigeons. Father used to laugh at the shooting in this country, and say they'd never have poachers here—the game wasn't worth it. No fishing, except an odd codfish, in the deepest waterholes; and you might sit half a day without a bite.

Now this was very bad for us boys. Lads want plenty of work, and a little play now and then to keep them straight. If there's none, they'll make it; and you can't tell how far they'll go when they once start.

Well, Jim and I used to get our horses and ride off quietly in the afternoon, as if we were going after cattle; but, in reality, as soon as we were out of sight of mother, to ride over to that old villain, Grimes, the shanty-keeper, where we met the young Dalys, and others of the same sort—talked a good deal of nonsense and gossip; what was worse played at all-fours and euchre, which we had learned from an American harvest hand, at one of the large farms.

Besides playing for money, which put us rather into trouble sometimes, as we couldn't always find a half-crown if we lost it, we learned another bad habit, and that was to drink spirits. What burning nasty stuff I thought it at first; and so did we all! But everyone wanted to be thought a man, and up to all kinds of wickedness, so we used to make it a point of drinking our nobbler, and sometimes treating the others twice, if we had cash.

There was another family that lived a couple of miles off, higher up the creek, and we had always been good friends with them, though they never came to our house, and only we boys went to theirs. They were the parents of the little girl that went to school with us, and a boy who was a year older than me.

Their father *had been* a gardener at home, and he

married a native girl who was born somewhere about the Hawkesbury, near Windsor. Her father had been a farmer, and many a time she told us how sorry she was to go away from the old place, and what fine corn and pumpkins they grew; and how they had a church at Windsor, and used to take their hay and fruit and potatoes to Sydney, and what a grand place Sydney was, with stone buildings called markets for people to sell fruit and vegetables and poultry in; and how you could walk down into Lower George Street and see Sydney Harbour, a great, shining salt water plain, a thousand times as big as the biggest waterhole, with ships and boats and sailors, and every kind of strange thing upon it.

Mrs. Storefield was pretty fond of talking, and she was always fond of me, because once when she was out after the cows, and her man was away, and she had left Grace at home, the little thing crawled down to the waterhole and tumbled in. I happened to be riding up with a message for mother, to borrow some soap, when I heard a little cry like a lamb's, and there was poor little Gracey struggling in the water like a drowning kitten, with her face under. Another minute or two would have finished her, but I was off the old pony and into the water like a teal flapper. I had her out in a second or two, and she gasped and cried a bit, but soon came to, and when Mrs. Storefield came home she first cried over her as if she would break her heart, and kissed her, and then she kissed me, and said, "Now, Dick Marston, you look here. Your mother's a good woman, though simple; your father I don't like, and I hear many stories about him that makes me think the less we ought to see of the lot of you the better. But you've saved *my child's life* to-day, and I'll be a friend and a mother

to you as long as I live, even if you turn out bad, and I'm rather afraid you will—you and Jim both—but it won't be my fault for want of trying to keep you straight; and John and I will be your kind and loving friends as long as we live, no matter what happens."

After that—it was strange enough—but I always took to the little toddling thing that I'd pulled out of the water. I wasn't very big myself, if it comes to that, and she seemed to have a feeling about it, for she'd come to me every time I went there, and sit on my knee and look at me with her big brown serious eyes—they were just the same after she grew up—and talk to me in her little childish lingo. I believe she knew all about it, for she used to say, "Dick pull Gracey out of water;" and then she'd throw her arms round my neck and kiss me, and walk off to her mother. If I'd let her drown then, and tied a stone round my neck and dropped through the reeds to the bottom of the big waterhole, it would have been better for both of us.

When John came home he was nearly as bad as the old woman, and wanted to give me a filly, but I wouldn't have it, boy as I was. I never cared for money nor money's worth, and I was not going to be paid for picking a kid out of the water.

George Storefield, Gracey's brother, was about my own age. He thought a lot of what I'd done for her, and years afterwards I threatened to punch his head if he said anything more about it. He laughed, and held out his hand.

"You and I might have been better friends lately," says he; "but don't you forget you've got another brother besides Jim—one that will stick to you, too, fair weather or foul."

I always had *a great* belief in George, though we

didn't get on over well, and often had fallings He was too steady and hardworking altogethe Jim and me. He worked all day and every and saved every penny he made. Catch him ga —no, not for a sixpence. He called the Dalys Jacksons thieves and swindlers, who would be locke or even hanged, some day, unless they mended t selves. As for drinking a glass of grog, you migh as soon ask him to take a little laudanum or arseni

"Why should I drink grog," he used to say—" stuff, too, as you get at that old villain Grimes's—w good appetite and a good conscience? I'm afraid man; the police may come and live on my groun what I care. I work all day, have a read in the eve and sleep like a top when I turn in. What do I more?"

"Oh, but you never see any life," Jim said; "y just like an old working bullock that walks up to the in the morning and never stops hauling till he's l at night. This is a free country, and I don't thi fellow was born for that kind of thing and nothing

"This country's like any other country, Jim," G would say, holding up his head, and looking straig him with his steady gray eyes; "and man must work save when he's young if he don't want to be a b or a slave when he's old. I believe in a man enj himself as well as you do, but my notion of that have a good farm, well stocked and paid for, bye-bye, and then to take it easy, perhaps when my ba a little stiffer than it is now."

"But a man must have a little fun when he is yo I said. "What's the use of having money when y *old and rusty,* and can't take pleasure in anything?'

"A man needn't be so very old at 40," he says then, 'and 20 years' steady work will put all of us youngsters vell up the ladder. Besides, I don't call it fun getting ıalf-drunk with a lot of blackguards at a low pothouse ɔr a shanty, listening to the stupid talk and boasting lies ɔf a pack of loafers and worse. They're fit for nothing ɔetter; but you and Jim are. Now, look here, I've got ı small contract from Mr. Andrews for a lot of fencing stuff. It will pay us wages and something over. If you like to go in with me, we'll go share and share. I know what hands you both are at splitting and fencing. What do you say?"

Jim, poor Jim, was inclined to take George's offer. He was that good-hearted that a kind word would turn him any time. But I was put out at his laying it down so about the Dalys and us shantying and gaffing, and I do think now that some folks are born so as they can't do without a taste of some sort of fun once in a way. I can't put it out clear, but it ought to be fixed somehow for us chaps that haven't got the gift of working all day and every day, but can do two days' work in one when we like, that we should have our allowance of reasonable fun and pleasure—that is, what we called pleasure, not what somebody thinks we ought to take pleasure in. Anyway, I turned on George rather rough, and I says, "We're not good enough for the likes of you, Mr. Storefield. It's very kind of you to think of us, but we'll take our own line and you take yours."

"I'm sorry for it, Dick, and more sorry that you take huff at an old friend. All I want is to do you good, and act a friend's part. Good-bye—some day you'll see it."

"You're hard on George," says Jim, "there's no pleasing you to-day; one *would think* there were lots of chaps

fighting how to give us a lift. Good-bye, George, old man; I'm sorry we can't wire in with you; we'd soon knock out those posts and rails on the ironbark range."

"You'd better stop, Jim, and take a hand in the deal," says I (or, rather, the devil, for I believe he gets inside a chap at times), "and then you and George can take a turn at local-preaching when you're cut out. I'm off." So without another word I jumped on to my horse and went off down the hill, across the creek, and over the boulders the other side, without much caring where I was going. The fact was, I felt I had acted meanly in sneering at a man who only said what he did for my good; and I wasn't at all sure that I hadn't made a breach between Gracey and myself, and, though I had such a temper when it was roused that all the world wouldn't have stopped me, every time I thought of not seeing that girl again made my heart ache as if it would burst.

I was nearly home before I heard the clatter of a horse's feet, and Jim rode up alongside of me. He was just the same as ever, with a smile on his face. You didn't often see it without one.

I knew he had come after me, and had given up his own fancy for mine.

"I thought you were going to stay and turn good," I said. "Why didn't you?"

"It might have been better for me if I had," he said, "but you know very well, Dick, that whatever turns up, whether it's for good or evil, you and I go together."

We looked at one another for a moment. Our eyes met. We didn't say anything; but we understood one another as well as if we had talked for a week. We rode up to the door of our cottage without speaking. The *sun had* set, and some of the stars had come out, early

as it was, for it was late autumn. Aileen was sitting on a bench in the verandah reading, mother was working away as usual at something in the house. Mother couldn't read or write, but you never caught her sitting with her hands before her. Except when she was asleep I don't think she ever was quite still.

Aileen ran out to us, and stood while we let go our horses, and brought the saddles and bridles under the verandah.

"I'm glad you're come home for one thing," she said. "There is a message from father. He wants you to meet him."

"Who brought it?" I said.

"One of the Dalys, Patsey, I think."

"All right," said Jim, kissing her as he lifted her up in his great, strong arms. "I must go in and have a gossip with the old woman. Aileen can tell me after tea. I daresay it's not so good that it won't keep."

Mother was that fond of both of us that I believe, as sure as I sit here, she'd have put her head on the block, or died in any other way for either of her boys, not because it was her duty, but glad and cheerful like, to have saved us from death or disgrace. I think she was fonder of us two than she was of Aileen. Mothers are generally fonder of their sons. Why, I never could see; and if she thought more of one than the other it was Jim. He was the youngest, and he had that kind of big, frolicsome, loving way with him, like a Newfoundland pup about half-grown. I always used to think, somehow, nobody ever seemed to be able to get into a pelter with Jim, not even father, and that was a thing as some people couldn't be got to believe. As for mother and

Aileen, they were as fond of him as if he'd been a big baby.

So while he went to sit down on the stretcher, and let mother put her arms round his neck and hug him and cry over him, as she always did if he'd been away more than a day or two, I took a walk down the creek with Aileen in the starlight, to hear all about this message from father. Besides I could see that she was very serious over it, and I thought there might be something in it more than common.

"First of all, did you make any agreement with George Storefield?" she said.

"No; why should I? Has he been talking to you about me? What right has he to meddle with my business?"

"Oh, Dick, don't talk like that. Anything that he said was only to do you a kindness, and Jim."

"Hang him, and his kindness too," I said. "Let him keep it for those that want it. But what did he tell you?"

"He said, first of all," answered poor Aileen, with the tears in her eyes, and trying to take hold of my hand, "that he had a contract for fencing timber, which he had taken at good prices, which he would share with you and Jim; that he knew you two and himself could finish it in a few weeks, and that he expected to get the contract for the timber for the new bridge at Dargo, which he would let you go shares in too. He didn't like to speak about that, because it wasn't certain; but he had calculated all the quantities and prices, and he was sure you would make £70 or £80 each before Christmas. Now, was there any harm in that; and don't you think it was very good of him to think of it?"

"*Well, he's* not a bad fellow, old George," I said,

"but he's a little too fond of interfering with other people's business. Jim and I are quite able to manage our own affairs, as I told him this evening, when I refused to have anything to do with his fencing arrangement."

"Oh, Dick, did you?" she said. "What a pity! I made sure Jim would have liked it so, for only last week he said he was sick and tired of having nothing to do—that he should soon lose all his knack at using tools that he used to be so proud of. Didn't he say he'd like to join George?"

"He would, I daresay, and I told him to do as he liked. I came away by myself, and only saw him just before we crossed the range. He's big enough to take his own line."

"But you know he thinks so much of you," she groaned out, "that he'd follow you to destruction. That will be the end of it, depend upon it, Dick. I tell you so now; you've taken to bad ways; you'll have his blood on your head yet."

"Jim's old enough and big enough to take care of himself," I said, sulkily. "If he likes to come my way I won't hinder him; I won't try to persuade him one way or the other. Let him take his own line; I don't believe in preaching and old women's talk. Let a man act and think for himself."

"You'll break my heart and poor mother's, too," said Aileen, suddenly taking both my hands in hers. "What has she done but love us ever since we were born, and what does she live for? You know she has no pleasure of any kind, you know she's afraid every morning she wakes that the police will get father for some of his cross doings; and now you and Jim are going the same wild way, and *what ever*—what ever will be the end of it?"

Here she let go my hands, and sobbed and c
if she was a child again, much as I remember he
one day when my kangaroo dog killed her favour
And Aileen was a girl that didn't cry much ge
and never about anything that happened to her
was always about somebody else and their misfc
She was a quiet girl, too, very determined, and no
given to talking about what she was going to d
when she made up her mind she was sure to stic
I used to think she was more like father than any
She had his coloured hair and eyes, and his
standing and looking, as if the whole world wouldr
him. But she'd mother's soft heart for all that,
took the more notice of her crying and whimperi
time because it was so strange for her.

If anyone could have seen straight into my he
then I was regularly knocked over, and had two m
go inside to Jim and tell him we'd take George's s
job, and start to tackle it first thing to-morrow m
but just then one of those confounded nighthawks
on a dead tree before us and began his "hoo-ho,"
it was laughing at me. I can see the place no
mountain black and dismal, the moon low and s
looking, the little waterhole glittering in the hal
and this dark bird hooting away in the night. A
feeling seemed to come over my mind, and if it ha
the devil himself standing on the dead limb it co
have had a worse effect on me as I stopped ther
certain whether to turn to the right or the left.

We don't often know in this world sometimes w
we are turning off along a road where we shall neve
back from, or whether we can go just a little way ar
at the far-off hills and new rivers, and come hom

I remember the whole lot of bad-meaning thoughts coming with a rush over my heart, and I laughed at myself for being so soft as to choose a hard-working, pokey kind of life at the word of a slow fellow like George, when I might be riding about the country on a fine horse, eating and drinking of the best, and only doing what people said half the old settlers had made their money by.

Poor Aileen told me afterwards that if she'd thought for a moment I could be turned she'd have gone down on her knees and never got up till I promised to keep straight and begin to work at honest daily labour like a man—like a man who hoped to end his days in a good house, on a good farm, with a good wife and nice children round him, and not in a prison cell. Some people would call the first, after years of honest work, and being always able to look everyone in the face, being more of a man than the other. But people have different ways and different ideas.

"Come, Ailie," I said, "are you going to whine and cry all night? I shall be afraid to come home if you're going to be like this. What's the message from father?"

She wiped away her tears, and, putting her hand on my shoulder, looked steadily into my face.

"Poor boy—poor, dear Dick," she said, "I feel as if I should see that fresh face of yours looking very different some day or other. Something tells me that there's bad luck before you. But never mind, you'll never lose your sister if the luck's ever so bad. Father sent word you and Jim were to meet him at Broken Creek and bring your whips with you."

"What in the world's that for?" I said, half speaking to myself. "It looks as if there was a big mob to drive, and where's he to get a big mob there in that moun-

tainous, beastly place, where the cattle all bolt like wallabies, and where I never saw twenty head together?"

"He's got some reason for it," said Aileen, sorrowfully. "If I were you I wouldn't go. It's no good, and father's trying now to drag you and Jim into the bad ways he's been following these years."

"How do you know it's so bad?" said I. "How can a girl like you know?"

"I know very well," she said. "Do you think I've lived here all these years and don't know things? What makes him always come home after dark, and be that nervous every time he sees a stranger coming up you'd think he was come out of gaol? Why has he always got money, and why does mother look so miserable when he's at home, and cheer up when he goes away?"

"He may get jobs of droving or something," I said. "You have no right to say that he's robbing, or something of that sort, because he doesn't care about tying himself to mother's apron-string."

Aileen laughed, but it was more like crying.

"You told me just now," she said—oh! so sorrowfully —"that you and Jim were old enough to take a line of your own. Why don't you do it now?"

"And tell father we'll have nothing more to do with him!"

"Why not?" she said, standing up straight before me, and facing me just as I saw father face the big bullock-driver before he knocked him down. "Why not? You need never ask him for another meal; you can earn an easy living in half-a-dozen ways, you and Jim. Why should you let him spoil your life and ruin your soul for evermore?"

"*The priest* put that into your head," I said, sneeringly;

"Father Doyle—of course he knows what they'll do with a fellow after he's dead."

"No!" she said, "Father Doyle never said a word about you that wasn't good and kind. He says mother's a good Catholic, and he takes an interest in you boys and me because of her."

"He can persuade you women to do anything," I said, not that I had any grudge against poor old Father Doyle, who used to come riding up the rough mountain track on his white horse, and tiring his old bones, just "to look after his flock," as he said—and nice lambs some of them were—but I wanted to tease her and make her break off with this fancy of hers.

"He never does, and couldn't persuade me, except for my good," said she, getting more and more roused, and her black eyes glowed again, "and I'll tell you what I'll do to prove it. It's a sin, but if it is I'll stand by it, and now I'll swear it (here she knelt down), as Almighty God shall help me at the last day, if you and Jim will promise me to start straight off up the country and take bush-work till shearing comes on, and never to have any truck with cross chaps and their ways, I'll turn Protestant. I'll go to church with you, and keep to it till I die."

Wasn't she a trump? I've known women that would give up a lot for a man they were sweet on, and wives that would follow their husbands about like spaniels, and women that would lie and deceive and all but rob and murder for men they were fond of, and sometimes do nearly as much to spite other women. But I don't think I ever knew a woman that would give up her religion for anyone before, and it's not as if she wasn't staunch to her own faith. She was as regular in her prayers and cross-

ings and beads and all the rest of it as mother herself, and if there ever was a good girl in the whole world she was one. She turned faint as she said this, and I thought she was going to drop down. If anything could have turned me then it would have been this. It was almost like giving her life for ours, and I don't think she'd have valued hers two straws if she could have saved us. There's a great deal said about different kinds of love in this world, but I can't help thinking that the love between brothers and sisters that have been brought up together and have had very few other people to care about is a higher, better sort than any other in the world. There's less selfishness about it—no thought but for the other's good. If that can be made safe, death and pain and poverty and misery are all little things. And wasn't I fond of Aileen, in spite of all my hardness and cross-grained obstinacy?—so fond that I was just going to hug her to me and say, "Take it all your own way, Ailie dear," when Jim came tearing out of the hut, bareheaded, and stood listening to a far-off sound that caught all our ears at once. We made out the source of it too well—far too well.

What was the noise at that hour of the night?

It was a hollow, faint distant roaring that gradually kept getting louder. It was the strange mournful bellowing that comes from a drove of cattle forced along an unknown track. As we listened the sound came clearly on the night wind, faint, yet still clearly coming nearer.

"Cattle being driven," Jim cried out; "and a big mob too. It's father—for a note. Let's get our horses and meet him."

CHAPTER IV.

"ALL right," said I, "he must have got there a day before his time. It is a big mob and no mistake. I wonder where they're taking them to." Aileen shrugged her shoulders and walked in to mother with a look of misery and despair on her face such as I never saw there before.

She knew it was no use talking to me now. The idea of going out to meet a large lot of unknown cattle had strongly excited us, as would have been the case with every bush-bred lad. All sorts of wonders passed through our minds as we walked down the creek bank, with our bridles in our hands, towards where our horses usually fed. One was easy to catch, the other with a little management was secured. In ten minutes we were riding fast through the dark trees and fallen timber towards the wild gullies and rock-strewed hills of Broken Creek.

It was not more than an hour when we got up to the cattle. We could hear them a good while before we saw them. "My word," said Jim, "ain't they restless. They can't have come far, or they wouldn't roar so. Where can the old man have 'touched' for them?"

"How should I know?" I said, roughly. I had a kind of idea, but I thought he would never be so rash.

When we got up I could see the cattle had been rounded up in a flat with stony ridges all round. There must have been three or four hundred of them, only a man and a boy riding round and wheeling them every now and then. Their horses were pretty well knocked up. I knew father at once, and the old chestnut mare

he used to ride—an animal with legs like timbers and a mule rump; but you couldn't tire her, and no beast that ever was calved could get away from her. The boy was a half-caste that father had picked up somewhere; he was as good as two men any day.

"So you've come at last," growled father, "and a good thing too. I didn't expect to be here till to-morrow morning. The dog came home, I suppose—that's what brought you here, wasn't it? I thought the infernal cattle would beat Warrigal and me, and we'd have all our trouble for nothing."

"Whose cattle are they, and what are you going to do with them?"

"Never you mind; ask no questions, and you'll see all about it to-morrow. I'll go and take a snooze now; I've had no sleep for three nights."

With our fresh horses and riding round so we kept the cattle easily enough. We did not tell Warrigal he might go to rest, not thinking a half-caste brat like him wanted any. He didn't say anything, but went to sleep on his horse, which walked in and out among the angry cattle as he sat on the saddle with his head down on the horse's neck. They sniffed at him once or twice, some of the old cows, but none of them horned him; and daylight came rather quicker than one would think.

Then we saw whose cattle they were; they had all Hunter's and Falkland's brands on, which showed that they belonged to Banda and Elingamah stations.

"By George!" says Jim, "they're Mr. Hunter's cattle, and all these circle dots belong to Banda. What a mob of calves! not one of them branded! What in the world does father intend to do with them?"

Father was up, and came over where we stood with

our horses in our hands before we had time to say more. He wasn't one of those that slept after daylight, whether he had work to do or not. He certainly *could* work; daylight or dark, wet or dry, cold or hot, it was all one to father. It seems a pity what he did was no use to him, as it turned out; for he was a man, was old dad, every inch of him.

"Now, boys," he said, quite brisk and almost good-natured for him, "look alive and we'll start the cattle; we've been long enough here; let 'em head up that gully, and I'll show you something you've never seen before for as long as you've known Broken Creek Ranges."

"But where are you going to take 'em to?" I said. "They're all Mr. Hunter's and Mr. Falkland's; the brands are plain enough."

"Are the calves branded, you blasted fool?" he said, while the black look came over his face that had so often frightened me when I was a child. "You do what I tell you if you've any pluck and gumption about you; or else you and your brother can ride over to Dargo Police-station and 'give me away' if you like; only don't come home again, I warn you, sons or no sons."

If I had done what I had two minds to do—for I wasn't afraid of him then, savage as he looked—told him to do his own duffing and ridden away with Jim there and then—poor Jim, who sat on his horse staring at both of us, and saying nothing—how much better it would have been for all of us, the old man as well as ourselves; but it seemed as if it wasn't to be. Partly from use, and partly from a love of danger and something new, which is at the bottom of half the crime in the bush districts, I turned my horse's head after the cattle, which were now beginning to struggle. Jim did

the same on his side. How easy is it for chaps to take the road to hell! for that was about the size of it, and we were soon too busy to think about much else.

The track we were driving on led along a narrow rocky gully which looked as if it had been split up or made out of a crack in the earth thousands of years ago by an earthquake or something of that kind. The hills were that steep that every now and then some of the young cattle that were not used to that sort of country would come sliding down and bellow as if they thought they were going to break their necks.

The water rushed down it like a torrent in wet winters, and formed a sort of creek, and the bed of it made what track there was. There were overhanging rocks and places that made you giddy to look at, and some of these must have fallen down and blocked up the creek at one time or other. We had to scramble round them the best way we could.

When we got nearly up to the head of the gully—and great work it was to force the foot-sore cattle along, as we couldn't use our whips overmuch—Jim called out—

"Why, here comes old Crib. Who'd have thought he'd have seen the track? Well done, old man. Now we're right."

Father never took any notice of the poor brute as he came limping along the stones. Woman or child, horse or dog, it's the same old thing—the more any creature loves a man in this world the worse they're treated. It looks like it, at any rate. I saw how it was; father had given Crib a cruel beating the night before, when he was put out for some trifling matter, and the dog had left him and run home. But now he had thought better of it, and seen our tracks and come to work and slave, with

his bleeding feet—for they were cut all to pieces—and got the whip across his back now and then for his pains. It's a queer world!

When we got right to the top of this confounded gully, nearly dead-beat all of us, and only for the dog heeling them up every now and then, and making his teeth nearly meet in them, without a whimper, I believe the cattle would have charged back and beat us. There was a sort of rough table-land—scrubby and stony and thick it was, but still the grass wasn't bad in summer, when the country below was all dried up. There were wild horses in troops there, and a few wild cattle, so Jim and I knew the place well; but it was too far and too much of a journey for our own horses to go often.

"Do you see that sugar-loaf hill with the bald top, across the range?" said father, riding up just then, as we were taking it easy a little. "Don't let the cattle straggle, and make straight for that."

"Why, it's miles away," said Jim, looking rather dismal. "We could never get 'em there."

"We're not going there, stupid," says father; "that's only the line to keep. I'll show you something about dinner-time that'll open your eyes a bit."

Poor Jim brightened up at the mention of dinner-time, for, boy-like, he was getting very hungry, and as he wasn't done growing he had no end of an appetite. I was hungry enough for the matter of that, but I wouldn't own to it.

"Well, we shall come to somewhere, I suppose," says Jim, when father was gone. "Blest if I didn't think he was going to keep us wandering in this blessed Nulla Mountain all day. I wish I'd never seen the blessed cattle. I was *only waiting* for you to hook it when we

first seen the brands by daylight, and I'd ha' been off like a brindle 'Mickey' down a range."

"Better for us if we had," I said; "but it's too late now. We must stick to it, I suppose."

We had kept the cattle going for three or four miles through the thickest of the country, every now and then steering our course by the clear round top of Sugarloaf, that could be seen for miles round, but never seemed to get any nearer, when we came on a rough sort of log-fence, which ran the way we were going.

"I didn't think there were any farms up here," I said to Jim.

"It's a 'break,'" he said, almost in a whisper. "There's a 'duffing-yard' somewhere handy; that's what's the matter."

"Keep the cattle along it, anyway. We'll soon see what it leads to."

The cattle ran along the fence, as if they expected to get to the end of their troubles soon. The scrub was terribly thick in places, and every now and then there was a break in the fence, when one of us had to go outside and hunt them until we came to the next bit. At last we came to a little open kind of flat, with the scrub that thick round it as you couldn't hardly ride through it, and, just as Jim said, there was the yard.

It was a "duffing" yard sure enough. No one but people who had cattle to hide and young stock they didn't want other people to see branded would have made a place there.

Just on the south side of the yard, which was built of great heavy stringybark trees cut down in the line of the fence, and made up with limbs and logs, the range *went up as steep* as the side of a house. The cattle

were that tired and footsore—half their feet were bleeding, poor devils—that they ran in through the slip-rails and began to lay down.

"Light a fire, one of you boys," says father, putting up the heavy sliprails and fastening them. "We must brand these calves before dark. One of you can go to that gunyah, just under the range where that big white rock is, and you'll find tea and sugar and something to eat."

Jim rushed off at once, while I sulkily began to put some bark and twigs together and build a fire.

"What's the use of all this cross work?" I said to father; "we're bound to be caught some day if we keep on at it. Then there'll be no one left to take care of mother and Aileen."

He looked rather struck at this, and then said quietly—

"You and your brother can go back now. Never say I kept you against your will. You may as well lend a hand to brand these calves; then you may clear out as soon as you like."

Well, I didn't quite like leaving the old chap in the middle of the work like that. I remember thinking, like many another young fool, I suppose, that I could draw back in time, just after I'd tackled this job.

Draw back, indeed! When does a man ever get the chance of doing that, once he's regularly gone in for any of the devil's work and wages? He takes care there isn't much drawing back afterwards. So I said—

"We may as well give you a hand with this lot; but we'll go home then, and drop all this duffing work. It don't pay. I'm old enough to know that, and you'll find it out yet, I expect, father, yourself."

"The fox *lives long*, and gives the hounds many a

long chase before he's run into," he said, with a grim chuckle. "I swore I'd be revenged on 'em all when they locked me up and sent me out here for a paltry hare; broke my old mother's heart, so it did. I've had a pound for every hair in her skin, and I shall go on till I die. After all, if a man goes to work cautious and runs mute it's not so easy to catch him in this country, at any rate."

Jim at this came running out of the cave with a face of joy, a bag of ship-biscuit, and a lot of other things.

"Here's tea and sugar," he said; "and there's biscuits and jam, and a big lump of cheese. Get the fire right, Dick, while I get some water. We'll soon have some tea, and these biscuits are jolly."

The tea was made, and we all had a good meal. Father found a bottle of rum, too; he took a good drink himself, and gave Jim and me a sip each. I felt less inclined to quarrel with father after that. So we drafted all the calves into a small pen-yard, and began to put our brand on them as quick as we could catch 'em.

A hundred and sixty of 'em altogether—all ages, from a month old to nearly a year. Fine strong calves, and in rare condition, too. We could see they were all belonging to Mr. Hunter and Mr. Falkland. How they came to leave them all so long unbranded I can't say. Very careless they often are on these large cattle-stations, so that sharp people like father and the Dalys, and a lot more, get an easy chance at them.

Whatever father was going to do with them all when he had branded 'em, we couldn't make out.

"There's no place to tail or wean 'em," whispered Jim. "We're not above thirty miles from Banda in a straight line. These cows are dead sure to make straight *back the very* minute they're let out, and very nice work

it'll look with all these calves with our brand on sucking these cows."

Father happened to come round for a hot brand just as Jim finished.

"Never you mind about the weaning," he snarled. "I shan't ask you to tail them either. It wouldn't be a nice job here, would it?" and father actually laughed. It wasn't a very gay kind of a laugh, and he shut up his mouth with a sort of snap again. Jim and I hadn't seen him laugh for I don't know how long, and it almost frightened us.

As Jim said, it wouldn't do to let the cattle out again. If calves are weaned, and have only one brand on, it is very hard for any man to swear that they are not the property of the man to whom that brand belongs. He may believe them to be his, but may never have seen them in his life; and if he has seen them on a camp or on the run, it's very hard to swear to any one particular red or spotted calf as you would to a horse.

The great dart is to keep the young stock away from their mothers until they forget one another, and then most of the danger is passed. But if calves with one man's brand on are seen sucking another man's cows, it is pretty plain that the brand on the calves has been put on without the consent of the owner of the cows—which is cattle-stealing; a felony, according to the Act 7 and 8 George IV., No. 29, punishable with three years' imprisonment, with hard labour on the roads of the colony or other place, as the Judge may direct.

There's a lot of law! How did I learn it? I had plenty of time in Berrima Gaol—worse luck—my first stretch. But it was after I'd done the foolishness, and not before.

CHAPTER V.

"Now then, you boys!" says father, coming up all of a sudden like, and bringing out his words as if it was old times with us, when we didn't know whether he'd hit first and talk afterwards, or the other way on, "get out the lot we've just branded, and drive 'em straight for that peak, where the water shines dripping over the stones, right again the sun, and look slippy; we're burning daylight, and these cows are making row enough, blast 'em! to be heard all the way to Banda. I'll go on and steady the lead; you keep 'em close up to me."

Father mounted the old mare. The dog stopped behind; he knew he'd have to mind the tail—that is the hindmost cattle—and stop 'em from breaking or running clear away from the others. We threw down the rails. Away the cattle rushed out, all in a long string. You'd a thought no mortal men could a kept 'em in that blind hole of a place. But father headed 'em, and turned 'em towards the peak. The dog worried those that wanted to stay by the yard or turn another way. We dropped our whip on 'em, and kept 'em going. In five minutes they were all a-moving along in one mob at a pretty sharpish trot, like a lot of store cattle. Father knew his way about, whether the country was thick or open. It was all as one to him. What a slashing stockman he would have made in new country, if he only could have kept straight.

It took us an hour's hard dinkum to get near the peak. Sometimes it was awful rocky, as well as scrubby, *and the poor* devils of cattle got as sore-footed as babies

—blood up to the knee, some of 'em; but we crowded 'em on; there was no help for it.

At last we rounded up on a flat, rocky, open kind of a place; and here father held up his hand.

"Let 'em ring a bit; some of their tongues are out. These young things is generally soft. Come here, Dick." I rode up, and he told me to follow him.

We walked our horses up to the edge of the mountain and looked over. It was like the end of the world. Far down there was a dark, dreadful drop into a sort of deep valley below. You couldn't see the bottom of it. The trees on the mountain side looked like bushes, and they were big ironbarks and messmates too. On three sides of us was this awful, desolate-looking precipice—a dreary, gloomy, God-forsaken kind of spot. The sky got cloudy, and the breeze turned cold and began to murmur and whistle in an odd, unnatural kind of way, while father, seeing how scared and puzzled I was, began to laugh. I shuddered. A thought crossed my mind that it might be the Enemy of Souls, in his shape, going to carry us off for doing such a piece of wickedness.

"Looks queer, doesn't it?" says father, going to the brink and kicking down a boulder, that rolled and crashed down the steep mountain side, tearing its way through scrub and heath till it settled down in the glen below. "It won't do for a man's horse to slip, will it, boy? And yet there's a track here into a fine large paddock, open and clear, too, where I'm going to put these cattle into."

I stared at him, without speaking, thinking was he mad.

"No! the old man isn't mad, youngster," he said; "not yet, at least. I'm going to show you a trick that none of you *native boys* are up to, smart as you think

yourselves." Here he got off the old mare, and began to lead her to the edge of the mountain.

"Now, you rally the cattle well after me," he said; "they'll follow the old mare after a bit. I left a few cows among 'em on purpose, and when they 'draw' keep 'em going well up, but not too fast."

He had lengthened the bridle of the mare, and tied the end of a light tether rope that he had round her neck to it. I saw her follow him slowly, and turn down a rocky track that seemed to lead straight over a bluff of the precipice.

However, I gave the word to "head on." The dog had started rounding 'em up as soon as he saw the old mare walk towards the mountain side, and the cattle were soon crushed up pretty close to the mare's heels.

Mind this, that they were so footsore and tender about the hoofs that they could not have run away from us on foot if they had tried.

After "ringing" a bit, one of the quiet cows followed up the old mare that was walking step by step forward, and all the rest followed her like sheep. Cattle will do that. I've seen a stockrider, when all the horses were dead beat, trying to get fat cattle to take a river in flood, jump off and turn his horse loose into the stream. If he went straight, and swam across, all the cattle would follow him like sheep.

Well, when the old mare got to the bluff she turned short round the right, and then I saw that she had struck a narrow path down a gully that got deeper and deeper every yard we went. There was just room for a couple or three calves to go abreast, and by-and-bye all of 'em was walking down it like as if they was the beasts agoing *into Noah's* Ark. It wound and wound and got deeper

and deeper till the walls of rock were ever so far above our heads. Our work was done then; the cattle had to walk on like sheep in a race. We led our horses behind them, and the dog walked along, saving his sore feet as well as he could, and never tried to bite a beast once he got within the walls. He looked quite satisfied, and kept chuckling almost to himself. I really believe I've seen dogs laugh. Once upon a time I've read of they'd have taken poor Crib for a familiar spirit, and hanged or burnt him. Well, he knew a lot, and no mistake. I've seen plenty of Christians as he could buy and sell, and no trouble to him. I'm dashed if the old mare, too, didn't take a pleasure in working cattle on the cross. She was the laziest old wretch bringing up the cows at home, or running in the horses. Many a time Jim and I took a turn out of her when father didn't know. But put her after a big mob of cattle—she must have known they couldn't be ours—and she'd clatter down a range like the wall of a house, and bite and kick the tail cattle if they didn't get out of her way. They say dogs and horses are all honest, and it's only us as teaches 'em to do wrong. My notion's they're a deal like ourselves, and some of 'em fancies the square racket dull and safe, while some takes a deal kindlier to the other. Anyhow, no cattle-duffer in the colonies could have had a better pair of mates than old Sally and Crib, if the devil himself had broken 'em in special for the trade.

It was child's play now, as far as the driving went. Jim and I walked along, leading our horses and yarning away as we used to do when we were little chaps bringing in the milkers.

"My word, Dick, dad's dropped into a fine road through this thun*dering mountain*, hasn't he? I wonder

where it leads to? How high the rock-walls are getting above us!" he says. "I know now. I think I heard long ago from one of the Crosbies of a place in the ranges down towards behind the Nulla Mountain, 'Terrible Hollow.' He didn't know about it himself, but said an old stockman told him about it when he was drunk. He said the Government men used to hide the cattle and horses there in old times, and that it was never found out."

"Why wasn't it found out, Jim? If the old fellow 'split' about it someone else would get to know."

"Well, old Dan said that they killed one man that talked of telling; the rest were too frightened after that, and they all swore a big oath never to tell anyone except he was on the cross."

"That's how dad come to know, I suppose," said Jim. "I wish he never had. I don't care about those cross doings. I never did. I never seen any good come out of them yet."

"Well, we must go through with it now, I suppose. It won't do to leave old dad in the lurch. You won't, will you, Jim?"

"You know very well I won't," says Jim, very sober-like. "I don't like it any the more for that. But I wish father had broke his leg, and was lying up at home, with mother nursing him, before he found out this hell-hole of a place."

"Well, we're going to get out of it, and soon too. The gully seems getting wider, and I can see a bit of open country through the trees."

"Thank God for that!" says Jim. "My boots 'll part company soon, and the poor devils of calves won't have *any hoofs* either, if there's much more of this."

"They're drawing faster now. The leading cattle are beginning to run. We're at the end of the drive."

So it was. The deep, rocky gully gradually widened into an open and pretty smooth flat; this, again, into a splendid little plain, up to the knees in grass; a big natural park, closed round on every side with sandstone rockwalls, as upright as if they were built, and a couple of thousand feet above the place where we stood.

This scrub country was crossed by two good creeks; it was several miles across, and a trifle more in length. Our hungry weaners spread out and began to feed, without a notion of their mothers they'd left behind; but they were not the only ones there. We could see other mobs of cattle, some near, some further off; horses, too; and the well-worn track in several ways showed that this was no new grazing ground.

Father came riding back quite comfortable and hearty-like for him.

"Welcome to Terrible Hollow, lads," says he. "You're the youngest chaps it has ever been shown to, and if I didn't know you were the right stuff, you'd never have seen it, though you're my own flesh and blood. Jump off, and let your horses go. They can't get away, even if they tried; they don't look much like that."

Our poor nags were something like the cattle, pretty hungry and stiff. They put their heads down to the thick green grass, and went in at it with a will.

"Bring your saddles along with you," father said, "and come after me. I'll show you a good camping place. You deserve a treat after last night's work."

We turned back towards the rocky wall, near to where we had come in, and there, behind a bush and a big piece of sandstone that had fallen down, was the entrance

to a cave. The walls of it were quite clean and white-looking, the floor was smooth, and the roof was pretty high, well blackened with smoke, too, from the fires which had been lighted in it for many a year gone by.

A kind of natural cellar had been made by scooping out the soft sandstone behind a ledge. From this father took a bag of flour and cornmeal. We very soon made some cakes in the pan, that tasted well, I can tell you. Tea and sugar, too, and quart pots, some bacon in a flour-bag; and that rasher fried in the pan was the sweetest meat I ever ate in all my born days.

Then father brought out a keg and poured some rum into a pint pot. He took a pretty stiff pull, and then handed it to us. "A little of it won't hurt you, boys," he said, "after a night's work."

I took some—not much; we hadn't learned to drink then—to keep down the fear of something hanging over us. A dreadful fear it is. It makes a coward of every man who doesn't lead a square life, let him be as game as he may.

Jim wouldn't touch it. "No," he said, when I laughed at him, "I promised mother last time I had more than was good for me at Dargo Races that I wouldn't touch it again for two years; and I won't either. I can stand what any other man can, and without the hard stuff, either."

"Please yourself," said father. "When you're ready we'll have a ride through the stock."

We finished our meal, and a first-rate one it was. A man never has the same appetite for his meals anywhere else that he has in the bush, specially if he has been up half the night. It's so fresh, and the air makes him feel as if he'd ate nothing for a week. Sitting on a log, or

in the cave, as we were, I've had the best meal I've ever tasted since I was born. Not like the close-feeling, close-smelling, dirty-clean grave-yard they call a gaol. But it's no use beginning on that. We were young men, and free, too. Free! By all the devils in hell, if there are devils—and there must be to tempt a man, or how could he be so great a fool, so blind a born idiot, as to do anything in this world that would put his freedoom in jeopardy? And what for? For folly and nonsense. For a few pounds he could earn with a month's honest work and be all the better man for it. For a false woman's smile that he could buy, and ten like her, if he only kept straight and saving. For a bit of sudden pride or vanity or passion. A short bit of what looks like pleasure, against months and years of weariness, and cold and heat, and dull half-death, with maybe a dog's death at the end!

I could cry like a child when I think of it now. I have cried many's the time and often since I've been shut up here, and dashed my head against the stones till I pretty nigh knocked all sense and feeling out of it, not so much in repentance, though I don't say I feel sorry, but to think what a fool, fool, fool I'd been. Yes, fool, three times over—a hundred times—to put my liberty and life against such a miserable stake—a stake the devil that deals the pack is so safe to win at the end.

I may as well go on. But I can't help breaking out sometimes when I hear the birds calling to one another as they fly over the yard, and know it's fresh air and sun and green grass outside that I never shall see again. Never see the river rippling under the big drooping trees, or the cattle coming down in the twilight to drink after the long hot day. Never, never more! And whose fault

is it? Who have I to blame? Perhaps father helped a bit; but I knew better, and no one is half as much to blame as myself.

Where were we? Oh, at the cave-mouth, coming out with our bridles in our hands to catch our horses. We soon did that, and then we rode away to the other cattle. They were a queer lot, in fine condition, but all sorts of ages and breeds, with every kind of brand and earmark.

Lots of the brands we didn't know, and had never heard of. Some had no brands at all—full-grown beasts, too; that was a thing we had very seldom seen. Some of the best cattle and some of the finest horses—and there were some real plums among the horses—had a strange brand, JJ.

"Who does the JJ brand belong to?" I said to father. "They're the pick of the lot, whose ever they are."

Father looked black for a bit, and then he growled out, "Don't you ask too many questions, lad. There's only four living men besides yourselves knows about this place; so take care and don't act foolishly, or you'll lose a plant that may save your life, as well as keep you in cash for many a year to come. That brand belongs to Starlight, and he was the only man left alive of the men that first found it and used it to put away stock in. He wanted help, and told me five years ago. He took in a half-caste chap, too, against my will. He helped him with that last lot of cattle that you noticed."

"But where did those horses come from?" Jim said "I never hardly saw such a lot before. All got the JJ brand on, too, and nothing else; all about three year old."

"They were brought here as foals," says father, "following their mothers. Some of them was foaled here;

nd, of course, as they've only the one brand on they ever can be claimed or sworn to. They're from some f Mr. Maxwell's best thoroughbred mares, and their sire ras Earl of Atheling, imported. He was here for a year."

"Well, they might look the real thing," said Jim, his yes brightening as he gazed at them. "I'd like to have hat dark bay colt with the star. My word, what a fore-and he's got; and what quarters, too. If he can't gallop 'll never say I know a horse from a poley cow."

"You shall have him, or as good, never fear, if you tick to your work," says father. "You mustn't cross Star-ight, for he's a born devil when he's taken the wrong vay, though he talks so soft. The half-caste is an out-nd-out chap with cattle, and the horse doesn't stand on our legs that he can't ride—and make follow him, for he matter of that. But he's worth watching. I don't believe in him myself. And now ye have the lot."

"And a d—d fine lot they are," I said, for I was vexed with Jim for taking so easy to the bait father held out to him about the horse. "A very smart crowd to be on the roads inside of five years, and drag us in with 'em."

"How do you make that out?" says father. "Are you going to turn dog, now you know the way in? Isn't it as easy to carry on for a few years more as it was twenty years ago?"

"Not by a long chalk," I said, for my blood was up, and I felt as if I could talk back to father and give him as good as he sent, and all for Jim's sake. Poor Jim! He'd always go to the mischief for the sake of a good horse, and many another "Currency" chap has gone the same way. It's a pity for some of 'em that a blood horse was ever foaled.

"You think you can't be tracked," says I, "but you must bear in mind you haven't got to do with the old-fashioned mounted police as was potterin' about when this 'bot' was first hit on. There's chaps in the police getting now, natives or all the same, as can ride and track every bit as well as the half-caste you're talking about. Some day they'll drop on the track of a mob coming in or getting out and then the game will be all up."

"You can cut it if you like now," said father, looking at me curious like. "Don't say I dragged you in. You and your brother can go home, and no one will ever know where you were; no more than if you'd gone to the moon."

Jim looked at the brown colt that just came trotting up as dad finished speaking—trotting up with his head high and his tail stuck out like a circus horse. If he'd been the devil in a horsehide he couldn't have chosen a better moment. Then his eyes began to glitter.

We all three looked at each other. No one spoke. The colt stopped, turned, and galloped back to his mates like a red flyer with the dogs close behind him.

It was not long. We all began to speak at once. But in that time the die was cast, the stakes were down, and in the pool were three men's lives.

"I don't care whether we go back or not," says Jim; "I'll do either way that Dick likes. But that colt I must have."

"I never intended to go back," I said. "But we're three d—d fools all the same—father and sons. It'll be the dearest horse you ever bought, Jim, old man, and so I tell you."

"Well, I suppose it's settled now," says father; "so let's have no more chat. We're like a pack of old women, blessed if we ain't."

After that we got on more sociably. Father took us all over the place, and a splendid paddock it was—walled all round but where we had come in, and a narrow gash in the far side that not one man in a thousand could ever hit on, except he was put up to it; a wild country for miles when you did get out—all scrub and rock, that few people ever had call to ride over. There was splendid grass everywhere, water, and shelter. It was warmer, too, than the country above, as you could see by the coats of the cattle and horses.

"If it had only been honestly come by," Jim said, "what a jolly place it would have been!"

Towards the north end of the paddock was a narrow gully with great sandstone walls all round, and where it narrowed the first discoverers had built a stockyard, partly with dry stone walls and partly with logs and rails.

There was no trouble in getting the cattle or horses into this, and there were all kinds of narrow yards and pens for branding the stock if they were clear-skins, and altering or "faking" the brands if they were plain. This led into another yard, which opened into the narrowest part of the gully. Once in this, like the one they came down, and the cattle or horses had no chance but to walk slowly up, one behind the other, till they got on the tableland above. Here, of course, every kind of work that can be done to help to disguise cattle was done. Earmarks were cut out and altered in shape, or else the whole ear was cropped off; every letter in the alphabet was altered by means of straight bars or half-circles, figures, crosses, everything you could think of.

"Mr. Starlight is an edicated man," said father. "This is all his notion; and many a man has looked at his own beast, with the ears altered and the brand faked, and

never dreamed he ever owned it. He's a great card is Starlight. It's a pity he ever took to this kind of life."

Father said this with a kind of real sorrow that made me look at him to see if the grog had got into his head; just as if his life, mine, and Jim's didn't matter a straw compared to this man's, whoever he was, that had had so many better chances than we had and had chucked 'em all away.

But it's a strange thing that I don't think there's any place in the world where men feel a more real out-and-out respect for a gentleman than in Australia. Everybody's supposed to be free and equal now; of course, they couldn't be in the convict days. But somehow a man that's born and bred a gentleman will always be different from other men to the end of the world. What's the most surprising part of it is that men like father, who have hated the breed and suffered by them, too, can't help having a curious liking and admiration for them. They'll follow them like dogs, fight for them, shed their blood, and die for them; must be some sort of a natural feeling. Whatever it is, it's there safe enough, and nothing can knock it out of nine-tenths of all the men and women you meet. I began to be uneasy to see this wonderful mate of father's, who was so many things at once—a cattle-stealer, a bushranger, and a gentleman.

CHAPTER VI.

After we'd fairly settled to stay, father began to be more pleasant than he'd ever been before. We were pretty likely, he said, to have a visit from Starlight and the *half-caste* in a day or two, if we'd like to wait. He was

to meet him at the Hollow on purpose to help him out with the mob of fat bullocks we had looked at. Father, it appears, was coming here by himself when he met this outlying lot of Mr. Hunter's cattle, and thought he and old Crib could bring them in by themselves. And a mighty good haul it was. Father said we should share the weaners between the three of us; that meant £50 a piece at least. The devil always helps beginners.

We put through a couple of days pleasantly enough, after our hardish bit of work. Jim found some fishhooks and a line, and we caught plenty of mullet and eels in the deep, clear waterholes. We found a couple of double-barrelled guns, and shot ducks enough to last us a week. No wonder the old frequenters of the Hollow used to live here for a month at a time, having great times of it as long as their grog lasted; and sometimes having the tribe of blacks that inhabited the district to make merry and carouse with them, like the buccaneers of the Spanish Main that I've read about, till the plunder was all gone. There were scrawls on the wall of the first cave we had been in that showed all the visitors had not been rude, untaught people; and Jim picked up part of a woman's dress splashed with blood, and in one place, among some smouldering packages and boxes, a long lock of woman's hair, fair, bright-brown, that looked as if the name of Terrible Hollow might not have been given to this lonely, wonderful glen for nothing.

We spent nearly a week in this way, and were beginning to get rather sick of the life, when father, who used always to be looking at a bare patch in the scrub above us, said—

"They're coming at last."

"Who are coming—*friends?*"

"Why, friends, of course. That's Starlight's signal. See that smoke? The half-caste always sends that up—like the blacks in his mother's tribe, I suppose."

"Any cattle or horses with them?" said Jim.

"No, or they'd send up two smokes. They'll be here about dinner-time, so we must get ready for them."

We had plenty of time to get ourselves or anything else ready. In about four hours we began to look at them through a strong spyglass which father brought out. By-and-bye we got sight of two men coming along on horseback on the top of the range the other side of the far wall. They wasn't particularly easy to see, and every now and then we'd lose sight of 'em as they got into thick timber or behind rocks.

Father got the spyglass on to 'em at last, pretty clear, and nearly threw it down with an oath.

"By—!" he says, "I believe Starlight's hurt somehow. He's so infernal rash. I can see the half-caste holding him on. If the police are on his tracks they'll spring the plant here, and the whole thing 'll be blown."

We saw them come to the top of the wall, as it were, then they stopped for a long while, then all of a sudden they seemed to disappear.

"Let's go over to the other side," says father; "they're coming down the gully now. It's a terrible steep, rough track, worse than the other. If Starlight's hurt bad he'll never ride down. But he has the pluck of the devil, sure enough."

We rode to the other side, where there was a kind of gully that came in, something like the one we came in by, but rougher, and full of gibbers (boulders). There was a path, but it looked as if cattle could never be driven or forced up it. We found afterwards that they

had an old pack bullock that they'd trained to walk up his, and down, too, when they wanted him, and the other cattle followed in his track, as cattle will.

Father showed us a sort of cave by the side of the track, where one man, with a couple of guns and a pistol or two, could have shot down a small regiment as they came down one at a time.

We stayed in there by the track, and after about half-an-hour we heard the two horses coming down slowly, step by step, kicking the stones down before them. Then we could hear a man groaning, as if he couldn't bear the pain, and partly as if he was trying to smother it. Then another man's voice, very soft and soothing like, trying to comfort another.

"My head's a-fire, and these cursed ribs are grinding against one another every step of this infernal ladder. Is it far now?" How he groaned then!

"Just got the bottom; hold on a bit longer and you'll be all right."

Just then the leading horse came out into the open before the cave. We had a good look at him and his rider. I never forgot them. It was a bad day I ever saw either, and many a man had cause to say the same.

The horse held up his head and snorted as he came abreast of us, and we showed out. He was one of the grandest animals I'd ever seen, and I afterwards found he was better than he looked. He came stepping down that beastly rocky goat-track, he, a clean thoroughbred that ought never to have trod upon anything rougher than a rolled training track, or the sound bush turf. And here he was with a heavy weight on his back—a half-dead, fainting man, that couldn't hold the reins—and

him walking down as steady as an old mountain bull or a wallaroo on the side of a creek bank.

I hadn't much time to look him over. I was too much taken up with the rider, who was lying forward on his chest across a coat rolled round and strapped in front of the saddle, and his arms round the horse's neck. He was as pale as a ghost. His eyes—great dark ones they were, too—were staring out of his head. I thought he was dead, and called out to father and Jim that he was.

They ran up, and we lifted him off after undoing some straps and a rope. He was tied on (that was what the half-caste was waiting for at the top of the gully). When we laid him down his head fell back, and he looked as much like a corpse as if he had been dead a day.

Then we saw he had been wounded. There was blood on his shirt, and the upper part of his arm was bandaged.

"It's too late, father," said I; "he's a dead man. What pluck he must have had to ride down there!"

"He's worth two dead 'uns yet," said father, who had his hand on his pulse. "Hold his head up one of you while I go for the brandy. How did he get hit, Warrigal?"

"That——Sergeant Goring," said the boy, a slight, active-looking chap, about sixteen, that looked as if he could jump into a gum tree and back again, and I believe he could. "Sergeant Goring, he very near grab us at Dilligah. We got a lot of old Jobson's cattle when he came on us. He jump off his horse when he see he couldn't catch us, and very near drop Starlight. My word, he very nearly fall off—just like that" (here he imitated a *man reeling* in his saddle); "but the old horse stop steady

with him, my word, till he come to. Then the sergeant fire at him again; hit him in the shoulder with his pistol. Then Starlight come to his senses, and we clear. My word, he couldn't see the way the old horse went. Ha, ha!"—here the young devil laughed till the trees and rocks rang again. "Gallop different ways, too, and met at the old needlerock. But they was miles away then."

Before the wild boy had come to the end of his story the wounded man had proved that it was only a dead faint, as the women call it, not the real thing. And after he had tasted a pannikin full of brandy and water, which father brought him, he sat up and looked like a living man once more.

"Better have a look at my shoulder," he said. "That ——fellow shot like a prize-winner at Wimbledon. I've had a squeak for it."

"Puts me in mind of our old poaching rows," said father, while he carefully cut the shirt off, that was stiffened with blood and showed where the bullet had passed through the muscle, narrowly missing the bone of the joint. We washed it, and relieved the wounded man by discovering that the other bullet had only been spent, after striking a tree most like, when it had knocked the wind out of him and nearly unhorsed him, as Warrigal said.

"Fill my pipe, one of you. Who the devil are these lads? Yours, I suppose, Marston, or you wouldn't be fool enough to bring them here. Why didn't you leave them at home with their mother? Don't you think you and I and this devil's limb enough for this precious trade of ours?"

"They'll take their luck as it comes, like others," growled *father; "what's good* enough for me isn't too

bad for them. We want another hand or two to work things right."

"Oh! we do, do we?" said the stranger, fixing his eyes on father as if he was going to burn a hole in him with a burning-glass; "but if I'd a brace of fine boys like those of my own I'd hang myself before I'd drag them into the pit after myself."

"That's all very fine," said father, looking very dark and dangerous. "Is Mr. Starlight going to turn parson? You'll be just in time, for we'll all be shopped if you run against the police like this, and next thing to lay them on to the Hollow by making for it when you're too weak to ride."

"What would you have me do? Pull up and hold up my hands? There was nowhere else to go; and that new sergeant rode devilish well, I can tell you, with a big chestnut well-bred horse, that gave old Rainbow here all he knew to lose him. Now, once for all, no more of that, Marston, and mind your own business. I'm the superior officer in this ship's company—you know that very well—your business is to obey me, and take second place."

Father growled out something, but did not offer to deny it. We could see plainly that the stranger was or had been far above our rank, whatever were the reasons which had led to his present kind of life.

We stayed for about ten days, while the stranger's arm got well. With care and rest, it soon healed. He was pleasant enough, too, when the pain went away. He had been in other countries, and told us all kinds of stories about them.

He said nothing, though, about his own former ways, *and we* often wondered whatever could have made him

take to such a life. Unknown to father, too, he gave us good advice, warned us that what we were in was the road to imprisonment or death in due course, and not to flatter ourselves that any other ending was possible.

"I have my own reasons for leading the life I do," he said, "and must run my own course, of which I foresee the end as plainly as if it was written in a book before me. Your father had a long account to square with society, and he has a right to settle it his own way. That yellow whelp was never intended for anything better. But for you lads"—and here he looked kindly in poor old Jim's honest face (and an honest face and heart Jim's was, and that I'll live and die on)—"my advice to you is, to clear off home, when we go, and never come back here again. Tell your father you won't come; cut loose from him, once and for all. You'd better drown yourselves comfortably at once than take to this cursed trade. Now, mind what I tell you, and keep your own counsel."

By-and-bye, the day came when the horses were run in for father and Mr. Starlight and Warrigal, who packed up to be off for some other part.

When they were in the yard we had a good look at his own horse—a good look—and if I'd been a fellow that painted pictures, and that kind of thing, I could draw a middlin' good likeness of him now.

By George! how fond I am of a good horse—a real well-bred clinker. I'd never have been here if it hadn't been for that, I do believe; and many another Currency chap can say the same—a horse or a woman—that's about the size of it, one or t'other generally fetches us. I shall never put foot in stirrup again, but I'll try and scratch out a sort of likeness of Rainbow.

He was a dark bay horse, nearly brown, without white hair on him. He wasn't above 15 hands and inch high, but looked a deal bigger than he was, for t way he held his head up and carried himself. He v deep and thick through behind the shoulders, and girth ever so much more than you'd think. He had a sh back, and his ribs went out like a cask, long quart great thighs and hocks, wonderful legs, and feet of cou to do the work he did. His head was plainish, but cl and bony, and his eye was big and well opened, with white showing. His shoulder was sloped back that m that he couldn't fall, no matter what happened his f legs. All his paces were good too. I believe he co jump—jump anything he was ridden at, and very horses could get the better of him for one mile or th

Where he'd come from, of course, we were not know then. He had a small private sort of brand t didn't belong to any of the big studs; but he was ne bred by a poor man. I afterwards found out that was stolen before he was foaled, like many another pl and his dam killed as soon as she had weaned him. of course, no one could swear to him, and Starlight co have ridden past the Supreme Court, at the assizes, never been stopped, as far as this horse was concerne

Before we went away, father and Starlight had so terrible long talks, and one evening Jim came to me, says he —

"What do you think they're up to now?"

"How should I know? Sticking up a bank, or bon a flock of maiden ewes to take up a run with? T seem to be game for anything. There'll be a hang match in the family if us boys don't look out."

"There's no knowing," says Jim, with a roguish l

in his eye (I didn't think then how near the truth I was), "but it's about a horse this time."

"Oh! a horse; that alters the matter. But what's one horse to make such a shine about?"

"Ah, that's the point," says poor old Jim, "it's a horse worth talking about. Don't you remember the imported entire that they had his picture in the papers—him that Mr. Windhall gave £2,000 for?"

"What! the Marquis of Lorne? Why you don't mean to say they're going for him?"

"By George, I do!" says Jim; "and they'll have him here, and twenty blood mares to put to him, before September."

"They're all gone mad—they'll raise the country on us. Every police trooper in the colony 'll be after us like a pack of dingoes after an old man kangaroo when the ground's boggy, and they'll run us down, too; they can't be off it. Whatever made 'em think of such a big touch as that?"

"That Starlight's the devil, I think," said Jim, slowly. "Father didn't seem to like it at first, but he brought him round bit by bit—said he knew a squatter in Queensland he could pass him on to; that they'd keep him there for a year and get a crop of foals by him, and when the 'derry' was off he'd take him over himself."

"But how's he going to nail him? People say Windhill keeps him locked up at night, and his box is close to his house."

"Starlight says he has a friend handy; he seems to have one or two everywhere. It's wonderful, as father told him, where he gets information."

"By George! it would be a touch, and no mistake. And if we could *get a few* colts by him out of thorough-

bred mares we might win half the races every year on our side and no one a bit the wiser."

It did seem a grand sort of thing—young fools that we were—to get hold of this wonderful stallion that we'd heard so much of, as thoroughbred as Eclipse; good as anything England could turn out. I say again, if it weren't for the horseflesh part of it, the fun and hard-riding and tracking, and all the rest of it, there wouldn't be anything like the cross-work that there is in Australia. It lies partly between that and the dry weather. There's the long spells of drought when nothing can be done by young or old. Sometimes for months you can't work in the garden, nor plough, nor sow, nor do anything useful to keep the devil out of your heart. Only sit at home and do nothing, or else go out and watch the grass withering' and the water dryin' up, and the stock dyin' by inches before your eyes. And no change, maybe, for months. The ground like iron and the sky like brass, as the parson said, and very true, too, last Sunday.

Then the youngsters, havin' so much idle time on their hands, take to gaffin' and flash talk; and money must be got to sport and pay up if they lose; and the stock all ramblin' about and mixed up, and there's a temptation to collar somebody's calves or foals, like we did that first red heifer. I shall remember her to my dying day. It seems as if I had put that brand on my own heart when I jammed it down on her soft skin. Anyhow, I never forgot it, and there's many another like me, I'll be bound.

The next morning Jim and I started off home. Father said he should stay in the Hollow till Starlight got round a bit. He told us not to tell mother or Ailie a word *about where we'd* been. Of course they couldn't be off

knowin' that we'd been with him; but we were to stall them off by saying we'd been helping him with a bit of bush-work or anything we could think of. "It'll do no good, and your mother's quite miserable enough as it is, boys," he said. "She'll know time enough, and maybe break her heart over it, too. Poor Norah!"

Dashed if I ever heard father say a soft thing before. I couldn't a' believed it. I always thought he was iron-bark outside and in. But he seemed real sorry for once. And I was near sayin', "Why don't ye cut the whole blessed lot, then, and come home and work steady and make us all comfortable and happy?" But when I looked again his face was all changed and hard-like. "Off you go," he says, with his old voice. "Next time I want either of you I'll send Warrigal for you."

And with that he walked off from the yard where we had been catching our horses, and never looked nigh us again.

We rode away to the low end of the gully, and then we led the horses up, foot by foot, and hard work it was —like climbing up the roof of a house. We were almost done when we got to the tableland at the top.

We made our way to the yard, where there were the tracks of the cows all round about it, but nothing but the wild horses had ever been there since.

"What a scrubby hole it is!" said Jim; "I wonder how in the world they ever found out the way to the Hollow?"

"Some runaway Government men, I believe, so that half-caste chap told me, and a gin* showed 'em the track down, and where to get water and everything. They lived on kangaroos at first. Then, by degrees, they

* A black woman.

used to crawl out by moonlight and collar a hc two or a few cattle. They managed to live there and years; one died, one was killed by the black last man showed it to the chaps that passed it Starlight. Warrigal's mother, or aunt or something the gin that showed it to the first white men.

CHAPTER VII.

It was pretty late that night when we got hom poor mother and Aileen were that glad to see u they didn't ask too many questions. Mother wo and look at the pair of us for ever so long without ing, and then the tears would come into her ey she'd turn away her head.

The old place looked very snug, clean, and cc able, too, after all the camping-out, and it was fir to have our own beds again. Then the milk and butter, and the eggs and bacon—my word! how Ji lay in; you'd have thought he was goin' on all nig

"By George! home's a jolly place after all," he "I am going to stay ever so long this time, and like an old near-side poler—see if I don't. Let' at your hands, Aileen; my word, you've been doin share."

"Indeed, has she," said mother. "It's a shan it is, and her with two big brothers, too."

"Poor Ailie," said Jim, "she had to take an ax she, in her pretty little hands; but she didn't cut a wood that's outside the door and I nearly broke m over, I'll go bail."

"How do you know?" says she, smiling roguis

"All the world might have been here for what you'd been the wiser—going away nobody knows where, and coming home at night like—like—"

"Bushrangers," says I. "Say it out; but we haven't turned out yet, if that's what you mean, Miss Marston."

"I don't mean anything but what's kind and loving, you naughty boy," says she, throwing her arms about my neck; "but why will you break our hearts, poor mother's and mine, by going off in such a wild way and staying away, as if you were doing something that you were ashamed of?"

"Women shouldn't ask questions," I said, roughly. "You'll know time enough, and if you never know, perhaps it's all the better."

Jim was alongside of mother by this time, lying down like a child on the old native dogskin rug that we tanned ourselves with wattle bark. She had her hand on his hair—thick and curly it was always from a child. She didn't say anything, but I could see the tears drip, drip down from her face; her head was on Jim's shoulder, and by-and-bye he put his arms round her neck. I went off to bed, I remember, and left them to it.

Next morning Jim and I were up at sunrise and got in the milkers, as we always did when we were at home. Aileen was up too. She had done all the dairying lately by herself. There were about a dozen cows to milk, and she had managed it all herself every day that we were away; put up the calves every afternoon, drove up the cows in the cold mornings, made the butter, which she used to salt and put into a keg, and feed the pigs with the skim milk. It was rather hard work for her, I [illegible] never saw her equal for farm work—rough or smooth. And she used to manage to dress neat and

look pretty all the time; not like some small settlers' daughters that I have seen, slouching about with a pair of Blucher boots on, no bonnet, a dirty frock, and petticoat like a blanket rag—not bad-looking girls either—and their hair like a dry mop. No, Aileen was always neat and tidy, with a good pair of thick boots outside and a thin pair for the house when she'd done her work.

She could frighten a wildish cow and bail up anything that would stay in a yard with her. She could ride like a bird and drive bullocks on a pinch in a dray or at plough, chop wood, too, as well as here and there a one. But when she was in the house and regularly set down to her sewing she'd look that quiet and steady-going you'd think she was only fit to teach in a school or sell laces and gloves.

And so she was when she was let work in her own way, but if she was crossed or put upon, or saw anything going wrong, she'd hold up her head and talk as straight as any man I ever saw. She'd a look just like father when he'd made up his mind, only her way was always the right way. What a difference it makes, doesn't it? And she was so handsome with it. I've seen a goodish lot of women since I left the old place, let alone her that's helped to put me where I am, but I don't think I ever saw a girl that was a patch on Aileen for looks. She had a wonderful fair skin, and her eyes were large and soft like poor mother's. When she was a little raised-like you'd see a pink flush come on her cheeks like a peach blossom in September, and her eyes had a bright startled look like a doe kangaroo when she jumps up and looks round. Her teeth were as white and even as a black gin's. The mouth was something like father's, *and* when she shut it up we boys always knew she'd

made up her mind, and wasn't going to be turned from it. But her heart was that good that she was always thinking of others and not of herself. I believe—I know —she'd have died for anyone she loved. She had more sense than all the rest of us put together. I've often thought if she'd been the oldest boy instead of me she'd have kept Jim straight, and managed to drive father out of his cross ways—that is, if anyone living could have done it. As for riding, I have never seen anyone that could sit a horse or handle him through rough, thick country like her. She could ride barebacked, or next to it, sitting sideways on nothing but a gunny-bag, and send a young horse flying through scrub and rocks, or down ranges where you'd think a horse could hardly keep his feet. We could all ride a bit out of the common, if it comes to that. Better if we'd learned nothing but how to walk behind a plough, year in year out, like some of the folks in father's village in England, as he used to tell us about when he was in a good humour. But that's all as people are reared, I suppose. We'd been used to the outside of a horse ever since we could walk almost, and it came natural to us. Anyhow, I think Aileen was about the best of the lot of us at that, as in everything else.

Well, for a bit all went on pretty well at home. Jim and I worked away steady, got in a tidy bit of crop, and did everything that lay in our way right and regular. We milked the cows in the morning, and brought in a big stack of firewood and chopped as much as would last for a month or two. We mended up the paddock fence, and tidied the garden. The old place hadn't looked so smart for many a day.

When we came in at night old mother used to look

that pleased and happy we couldn't help feeling better in our hearts. Aileen used to read something out of the paper that she thought might amuse us. I could read pretty fair, and so could Jim; but we were both lazy at it, and after working pretty hard all day didn't so much care about spelling out the long words in the farming news or the stories they put in. All the same, it would have paid us better if we'd read a little more and put the "bullocking" on one side, at odd times. A man can learn as much out of a book or a paper sometimes in an hour as will save his work for a week, or put him up to working to better purpose. I can see that now—too late, and more's the pity.

Anyhow, Aileen could read pretty near as fast as anyone I ever saw, and she used to reel it out for us, as we sat smoking over the fire, in a way that kept us jolly and laughing till it was nearly turning-in-time. Now and then George Storefield would come and stay an hour or two. He could read well; nearly as well as she could. Then he had always something to show her that she'd been asking about. His place was eight miles off, but he'd always get his horse and go home, whatever the night was like.

"I must be at my work in the morning," he'd say; "it's more than half a day gone if you lose that, and I've no half-days to spare, or quarter days either."

* * * * *

So we all got on first rate, and anybody would have thought that there wasn't a more steady-going, hard-working, happy family in the colony. No more there wasn't, while it lasted. After all, what is there that's half as good as being all right and square, working hard for *the food you* eat, and the sleep you enjoy, able to look

all the world in the face, and afraid of nothing and nobody!

We were so quiet and comfortable till the winter was over and the spring coming on, till about September, that I almost began to believe we'd never done anything in our lives we could be made to suffer for.

Now and then, of course, I used to wake up in the night, and my thoughts would go back to "Terrible Hollow," that wonderful place; and one night with the unbranded cattle, and Starlight, with the blood dripping on to his horse's shoulder, and the half-caste, with his hawk's eye and glittering teeth—father, with his gloomy face and dark words. I wondered whether it was all a dream; whether I and Jim had been in at all; whether any of the "cross-work" had been found out; and, if so, what would be done to me and Jim; most of all, though, whether father and Starlight were away after some "big touch;" and, if so, where and what it was, and how soon we should hear of it.

As for Jim, he was one of those happy-go-lucky fellows that didn't bother himself about anything he didn't see or run against. I don't think it ever troubled him. It was the only bad thing he'd ever been in. He'd been drawn in against his will, and I think he had made up his mind—pretty nearly—not to go in for any more.

I have often seen Aileen talking to him, and they'd walk along in the evening when the work was done—he with his arm round her waist, and she looking at him with that quiet, pleased face of hers, seeming so proud and fond of him, as if he'd been the little chap she used to lead about and put on the old pony, and bring into the calf-pen when she was milking. I remember he had a fight with a little *bull-calf*, about a week old, that came

in with a wild heifer, and Aileen made as much of his pluck as if it had been a mallee scrubber. The calf ba-ed and butted at Jim, as even the youngest of them will, if they've the wild blood in 'em, and nearly upset him; he was only a bit of a toddler. But Jim picked up a loose leg of a milking-stool, and the two went at it hammer and tongs. I could hardly stand for laughing, till the calf gave him best and walked.

Aileen pulled him out, and carried him in to mother, telling her that he was the bravest little chap in the world; and I remember I got scolded for not going to help him. How these little things come back!

"I'm beginning to be afraid," says George, one evening, "that it's going to be a dry season."

"There's plenty of time yet," says Jim, who always took the bright side of things; "it might rain towards the end of the month."

"I was thinking the same thing," I said. "We haven't had any rain to speak of for a couple of months, and that bit of wheat of ours is beginning to go back. The oats look better."

"Now I think of it," put in Jim, "Dick Dawson came in from outside, and he said things are shocking bad; all the frontage bare already, and the water drying up."

"It's always the way," I said, bitter-like. "As soon as a poor man's got a chance of a decent crop, the season turns against him or prices go down, so that he never gets a chance."

"It's as bad for the rich man, isn't it?" said George. "It's God's will, and we can't make or mend things by complaining."

"I don't know so much about that," I said, sullenly. "*But it's* not as bad for the rich man. Even if the

squatters suffer by a drought and lose their stock, they've more stock and money in the bank, or else credit to fall back on; while the like of us lose all we have in the world, and no one would lend us a pound afterwards to save our lives."

"It's not quite so bad as that," said George. "I shall lose my year's work unless rain comes, and most of the cattle and horses besides; but I shall be able to get a few pounds to go on with, however the season goes."

"Oh! if you like to bow and scrape to rich people, well and good," I said; "but that's not my way. We have as good a right to our share of the land and some other good things as they have, and why should we be done out of it?"

"If we pay for the land as they do, certainly," said George.

"But why should we pay? God Almighty, I suppose, made the land and the people too, one to live on the other. Why should we pay for what is our own? I believe in getting my share somehow."

"That's a sort of argument that doesn't come out right," said George. "How would you like another man to come and want to halve the farm with you?"

"I shouldn't mind; I should go halves with someone else who had a bigger one," I said. "More money too, more horses, more sheep, a bigger house! Why should he have it and not me?"

"That's a lazy man's argument, and—well, not an honest man's," said George, getting up and putting on his cabbage-tree. "I can't sit and hear you talk such rot. Nobody can work better than you and Jim, when you like. I wonder you don't leave such talk to fellows like Frowser, that's always spouting at the Shearers' Arms."

"Nonsense or not, if a dry season comes and knocks all our work over, I shall help myself to someone's stuff that has more than he knows what to do with."

"Why can't we all go shearing, and make as much as will keep us for six months?" said George. "I don't know what we'd do without the squatters."

"Nor I either; more ways than one; but Jim and I are going shearing next week. So perhaps there won't be any need for 'duffing' after all."

"Oh, Dick!" said Aileen, "I can't bear to hear you make a joke of that kind of thing. Don't we all know what it leads to! Wouldn't it be better to live on dry bread and be honest than to be full of money and never know the day when you'd be dragged to gaol?"

"I've heard all that before; but ain't there lots of people that have made their money by all sorts of villainy, that look as well as the best, and never see a gaol?"

"They're always caught some day," says poor Aileen, sobbing, "and what a dreadful life of anxiety they must lead!"

"Not at all," I said. "Look at Lucksly, Squeezer, and Fryingpan Jack. Everybody knows how they got their stock and their money. See how they live. They've got stations, and public-house and town property, and they get richer every year. I don't think it pays to be too honest in a dry country."

"You're a naughty boy, Dick; isn't he, Jim?" she said, smiling through her tears. "But he doesn't mean half what he says, does he?"

"Not he," says Jim; "and very likely we'll have lots of rain after all."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE "big squatter," as he was called on our side of the country, was Mr. Falkland. He was an Englishman that had come young to the colony, and worked his way up by degrees. He had had no money when he first came, people said; indeed, he often said so himself. He was not proud, at any rate in that way, for he was not above telling a young fellow that he should never be downhearted because he hadn't a coat to his back or a shilling in his pocket, because he, Herbert Falkland, had known what it was to be without either. "This was the best country in the whole world," he used to say, "for a gentleman who was poor or a working man." The first sort could always make an independence if they were moderately strong, liked work and did not drink. There were very few countries where idle, unsteady people got rich. "As for the poor man, he was the real rich man in Australia; high wages, cheap food, lodging, clothing, travelling. What more did he want? He could save money, live happily and die rich, if he wasn't a fool or a rogue. Unfortunately, these last were highly popular professions; and many people, high and low, belonged to them here—and everywhere else."

We were all well up in this kind of talk, because for the last two or three years, since we had begun to shear pretty well, we had always shorn at his shed. He was one of those gentlemen—and he was a gentleman, if ever there was one—that takes a deal of notice of his working hands, particularly if they were young. Jim he took a great fancy to the first moment he saw him. He didn't care so much about me.

"You're a sulky young dog, Richard Marston," he used to say. "I'm not sure that you'll come to any good; and though I don't like to say all I hear about your father before you, I'm afraid he doesn't teach you anything worth knowing. But Jim there's a grand fellow; if he'd been caught young and weaned from all of your lot, he'd have been an honour to the land he was born in. He's too good for you all."

"Every one of you gentlemen wants to be a small God Almighty," I said, impudently. "You'd like to break us all in and put us in yokes and bows, like a lot of working bullocks."

"You mistake me, my boy, and all the rest of us who are worth calling men, let alone gentlemen. We are your best friends, and would help you in every way if you'd only let us."

"I don't see so much of that."

"Because you often fight against your own good. We should like to see you all have farms of your own—to be all well taught and able to make the best of your lives—not driven to drink, as many of you are, because you have no notion of any rational amusement, and anything between hard work and idle dissipation."

"And suppose you had all this power," I said—for if I was afraid of father there wasn't another man living that could overcrow me—"don't you think you'd know the way to keep all the good things for yourselves? Hasn't it always been so?"

"I see your argument," he said, quite quiet and reasonable, just as if I had been a swell like himself—that was why he was unlike any other man I ever knew—"and it is a perfectly fair way of putting it. But your class might, I think, always rely upon there being enough

kindness and wisdom in ours to prevent that state of things. Unfortunately, neither side trusts the other enough. And now the bell is going to ring, I think."

Jim and I stopped at Boree shed till all the sheep were cut out. It pays well if the weather is pretty fair, and it isn't bad fun when there's twenty or thirty chaps of the right sort in the shearers' hut; there's always some fun going on. Shearers work pretty hard, and as they buy their own rations generally, they can afford to live well. After a hard day's shearing—that is from five o'clock in the morning to seven at night, going best pace all the time, every man working as hard as if he was at it for his life—one would think a man would be too tired to do anything. But we were mostly strong and hearty, and at that age a man takes a deal of killing; so we used to have a little card-playing at night to pass away the time.

Very few of the fellows had any money to spend. They couldn't get any either until shearing was over and they were paid off; but they'd get someone who could write to scribble a lot of I O U's, and they did as well.

We used to play "all-fours" and "loo," and now and then an American game which some of the fellows had picked up. It was strange how soon we managed to get into big stakes. I won at first, and then Jim and I began to lose, and had such a lot of I O U's out that I was afraid we'd have no money to take home after shearing. Then I began to think what a fool I'd been to play myself and drag Jim into it, for he didn't want to play at first.

One day I got a couple of letters from home—one from Aileen and another in a strange hand. It had come to our little *post-office, and* Aileen had sent it on to Boree.

When I opened it there were a few lines, with father's name at the bottom. He couldn't write, so I made sure that Starlight had written it for him. He was quite well, it said; and to look out for him about Christmas time; he might come home then, or send for us; to stop at Boree if we could get work, and keep a couple of horses in good trim, as he might want us. A couple of £5 notes fell out of the letter as I opened it.

When I looked at them first I felt a kind of fear. I knew what they came from. And I had a sort of feeling that we should be better without them. However, the devil was too strong for me. Money's a tempting thing, whether it's notes or gold, especially when a man's in debt. I had begun to think the fellows looked a little cool on us the last three or four nights, as our losses were growing big.

'So I gave Jim his share; and after tea, when we sat down again, there weren't more than a dozen of us that were in the card racket. I flung down my note, and Jim did his, and told them that we owed to to take change out of that and hand us over their paper for the balance.

They all stared, for such a thing hadn't been seen since the shearing began. Shearers, as a rule, come from their homes in the settled districts very bare. They are not very well supplied with clothes; their horses are poor and done up; and they very seldom have a note in their pockets, unless they have managed to sell a spare horse on the journey.

So we were great men for the time, looked at by the others with wonder and respect. We were fools enough to be pleased with it. Strangely, too, our luck turned *from that minute*, and it ended in our winning not only

our own back, but more than as much more from the other men.

I don't think Mr. Falkland liked these goings on. He wouldn't have allowed cards at all if he could have helped it. He was a man that hated what was wrong, and didn't value his own interest a pin when it came in the way. However, the shearing hut was our own, in a manner of speaking, and as long as we shore clean and kept the shed going the overseer, Mr. M'Intyre, didn't trouble his head much about our doings in the hut. He was anxious to get done with the shearing, to get the wool into the bales before the dust came in, and the grass seed ripened, and the clover burrs began to fall.

"Why should ye fash yoursel'," I heard him say once to Mr. Falkland, "aboot these young deevils like the Marstons? They're as good's ready money in auld Nick's purse. It's bred and born and welded in them. Ye'll just have the burrs and seeds amang the wool if ye keep losing a smart shearer for the sake o' a wheen cards and dice; and ye'll mak' nae heed of convairtin' thae young caterans ony mair than ye'll change a Norroway falcon into a barn-door chuckie."

I wonder if what he said was true—if we couldn't help it; if it was in our blood? It seems like it; and yet it's hard lines to think a fellow must grow up and get on the cross in spite of himself, and come to the gallows-foot at last, whether he likes it or not. The parson here isn't bad at all. He's a man and a gentleman, too; and he's talked and read to me by the hour. I suppose some of us chaps are like the poor stupid tribes that the Israelites found in Canaan, only meant to live for a bit and then to be rubbed out to make room for better people.

When the *shearing* was nearly over we had a Saturday

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afternoon to ourselves. We had finished all the sheep that were in the shed, and old M'Intyre didn't like to begin a fresh flock. So we got on our horses and took a ride into the township just for the fun of the thing, and for a little change. The horses had got quite fresh with the rest and the spring grass. Their coats were shining, and they all looked very different from what they did when we first came. Our two were not so poor when they came, so they looked the best of the lot, and jumped about in style when we mounted. Ah! only to think of a good horse.

All the men washed themselves and put on clean clothes. Then we had our dinner and about a dozen of us started off for the town.

Poor old Jim, how well he looked that day! I don't think you could pick a young fellow anywhere in the countryside that was a patch on him for good looks and manliness, somewhere about six foot or a little over, as straight as a rush, with a bright blue eye that was always laughing and twinkling, and curly dark brown hair. No wonder all the girls used to think so much of him. He could do anything and everything that a man could do. He was as strong as a young bull, and as active as a rock wallaby—and ride! Well, he sat on his horse as if he was born on one. With his broad shoulders and upright easy seat he was a regular picture on a good horse.

And he had a good one under him to-day; a big, brown, resolute, well-bred horse he had got in a swap because the man that had him was afraid of him. Now that he had got a little flesh on his bones he looked something quite out of the common. "A deal too good for a poor man, and him honest," as old M'Intyre said.

But Jim turned on him pretty sharp, and said he had

got the horse in a fair deal, and had as much right to a good mount as anyone else—super or squatter, he didn't care who he was.

And Mr. Falkland took Jim's part, and rather made Mr. M'Intyre out in the wrong for saying what he did. The old man didn't say much more, only shook his head, saying—

"Ah, ye're a grand laddie, and buirdly, and no that thrawn, either—like ye, Dick, ye born deevil," looking at me. "But I misdoot sair ye'll die wi' your boots on. There's a smack o' Johnnie Armstrong in the glint o' yer e'e. Ye'll be to dree yer weird, ther's nae help for't."

"What's all that lingo, Mr. M'Intyre?" called out Jim, all good-natured again. "Is it French or Queensland blacks' yabber? Blest if I understand a word of it. But I didn't want to be nasty, only I am regular shook on this old moke, I believe, and he's as square as Mr. Falkland's dogcart horse."

"Maybe ye bocht him fair eneugh. I'll no deny you. I saw the receipt mysel'. But where did yon lang-leggit, long-leggit, long-lockit, Fish River moss-trooping callant win haud o' him? Answer me that, Jeems."

"That says nothing," answered Jim. "I'm not supposed to trace back every horse in the country and find out all the people that owned him since he was a foal. He's mine now, and mine he'll be till I get a better one."

"A contuma-acious and stiff-necked generation," said the old man, walking off and shaking his head. "And yet he's a fine laddie; a gra-and laddie wad he be with good guidance. It's the Lord's doing, nae doot, and we daurna fault it; it's wondrous in our een."

That was the way old Mac always talked. Droll lingo, wasn't it?

CHAPTER IX.

WELL, away we went to this township. Bundah was the name of it; not that there was anything to do or see when we got there. It was the regular up-country village, with a public-house, a store, a pound, and a blacksmith's shop. However, a public-house is not such a bad place—at any rate it's better than nothing when a fellow's young and red-hot for anything like a bit of fun, or even a change. Some people can work away day after day, and year after year, like a bullock in a team or a horse in a chaff-cutting machine. It's all the better for them if they can, though I suppose they never enjoy themselves except in a cold-blooded sort of way. But there's other men that can't do that sort of thing, and it's no use talking. They must have life and liberty and a free range. There's some birds, and animals, too, that either pine in a cage or kill themselves, and I suppose it's the same way with some men. They can't stand the cage of what's called honest labour, which means working for someone else for twenty or thirty years, never having a day to yourself, or doing anything you like, and saving up a trifle for your old age when you can't enjoy it. I don't wonder youngsters break traces and gallop off like a colt out of a team.

Besides, sometimes there's a good-looking girl even at a bush public, the daughter or the barmaid, and it's odd, now, what a difference that makes. There's a few glasses of grog going, a little noisy, rattling talk, a few smiles and a saucy answer or two from the girl, a look at the last newspaper, or a bit of the town news from the *landlord; he*'s always time to read. Hang him—I mean

confound him—for he's generally a sly old spider who sucks us fellows pretty dry, and then don't care what becomes of us. Well, it don't amount to much, but it's life—the only taste of it that chaps like us are likely to get. And people may talk as much as they like; boys, and men too, will like it, and take to it, and hanker after it, as long as the world lasts. There's danger in it, and misery, and death often enough comes of it, but what of that? If a man wants a swim on the sea-shore he won't stand all day on the beach because he may be drowned or snapped up by a shark, or knocked against a rock, or tired out and drawn under by the surf. No, if he's a man he'll jump in and enjoy himself all the more because the waves are high and the waters deep. So it was very good fun to us, simple as it might sound to some people. It was pleasant to be bowling along over the firm green turf, along the plain, through the forest, gully, and over the creek. Our horses were fresh, and we had a scurry or two, of course; but there wasn't one that could hold a candle to Jim's brown horse. He was a long-striding, smooth goer, but he got over the ground in wonderful style. He could jump, too, for Jim put him over a big log fence or two, and he sailed over them like a forester buck over the head of a fallen wattle.

Well, we'd had our lark at the Bundah Royal Hotel, and were coming home to tea at the station, all in good spirits, but sober enough, when, just as we were crossing one of the roads that came through the run—over the "Pretty Plain," as they called it—we heard a horse coming along best pace. When we looked who should it be but Miss Falkland, the owner's only daughter.

She was an only child, and the very apple of her father's eye, *you may* be sure. The shearers mostly knew

her by sight, because she had taken a fancy to come down with her father a couple of times to see the shed when we were all in full work.

A shed's not exactly the best place for a young lady to come into. Shearers are rough in their language now and then. But every man liked and respected Mr. Falkland, so we all put ourselves on our best behaviour, and the two or three flash fellows who had no sense or decent feeling were warned that if they broke out at all they would get something to remember it by.

But when we saw that beautiful, delicate-looking creature stepping down the boards between the two rows of shearers, most of them stripped to their jerseys and working like steam-engines, looking curiously and pitifully at the tired men and the patient sheep, with her great, soft, dark eyes and fair white face like a lily, we began to think we'd heard of angels from heaven, but never seen one before.

Just as she came opposite Jim, who was trying to shear sheep and sheep with the "ringer" of the shed, who was next on our right, the wether he was holding kicked, and knocking the shears out of his hand, sent them point down against his wrist. One of the points went right in, and though it didn't cut the sinews, as luck would have it, the point stuck out at the other side; out spurted the blood, and Jim was just going to let out when he looked up and saw Miss Falkland looking at him, with her beautiful eyes so full of pity and surprise that he could have had his hand chopped off, so he told me afterwards, rather than vex her for a moment. So he shut up his mouth and ground his teeth together, for it was no joke in the way of pain, and the blood began to *run like* a blind creek after a thunderstorm.

"Oh! poor fellow. What a dreadful cut! Look, papa!" she cried out. "Hadn't something better be bound round it? How it bleeds! Does it pain much?"

"Not a bit, miss!" said Jim, standing up like a schoolboy going to say his lesson. "That is, it doesn't matter if it don't stop my shearing."

"Tar!" sings out my next-door neighbour. "Here, boy; tar wanted for No. 36. That'll put it all right, Jim; it's only a scratch."

"You mind your shearing, my man," said Mr. Falkland, quietly. "I don't know whether Mr. M'Intyre will quite approve of that last sheep of yours. This is rather a serious wound. The best thing is to bind it up at once."

Before anyone could say another word Miss Falkland had whipped out her soft fine cambric handkerchief and torn it in two.

"Hold up your hand," she said. "Now, papa, lend me yours." With the last she cleared the wound of the flowing blood, and then neatly and skilfully bound up the wrist firmly with the strips of cambric. This she further protected by her father's handkerchief, which she helped herself to and finally stopped the blood with.

Jim kept looking at her small white hands all the time she was doing it. Neither of us had ever seen such before—the dainty skin, the pink nails, the glittering rings.

"There," she said, "I don't think you ought to shear any more to-day; it might bring on inflammation. I'll send to know how it gets on to-morrow."

"No, miss; my grateful thanks, miss," said Jim, opening his eyes and looking as if he'd like to drop down on his knees and pray to her. "I shall never forget your goodness, Miss Falkland, if I live till I'm a hundred."

Then Jim bent his head a bit—I don't suppose he ever made a bow in his life before—and then drew himself up as straight as a soldier, and Miss Falkland made a kind of bow and smile to us all and passed out.

Jim did shear all the same that afternoon, though the tally wasn't any great things. "I can't go and lie down in a bunk in the men's hut," he said; "I must chance it," and he did. Next day it was worse and very painful, but Jim stuck to the shears, though he used to turn white with the pain at times, and I thought he'd faint. However, it gradually got better, and, except a scar, Jim's hand was as good as ever.

Jim sent back Mr. Falkland's handkerchief after getting the cook to wash it and iron it out with a bit of a broken axletree; but the strips of white handkerchief—one had C. F. in the corner—he put away in his swag, and made some foolish excuse when I laughed at him about it.

She sent down a boy from the house next day to ask how Jim's hand was, and the day after that, but she never came to the shed any more. So we didn't see her again.

So it was this young lady that we saw coming tearing down the back road, as they called it, that led over the Pretty Plain. A good way behind we saw Mr. Falkland, but he had as much chance of coming up with her as a cattle dog of catching a "brush flyer."

The stable boy, Billy Donnellan, had told us (of course, like all those sort of youngsters, he was fond of getting among the men and listening to them talk) all about Miss Falkland's new mare.

She was a great beauty and thoroughbred. The stud groom had bought her out of a travelling mob from New England when she was dog-poor and hardly able to drag

herself along. Everybody thought she was going to be the best lady's horse in the district; but though she was as quiet as a lamb at first she had begun to show a nasty temper lately, and to get very touchy. "I don't care about chestnuts myself," says Master Billy, smoking a short pipe as if he was 30; "they've a deal of temper, and she's got too much white in her eye for my money. I'm afeard she'll do some mischief afore we've done with her; and Miss Falkland's that game as she won't have nothing done to her. I'd ride the tail off her but what I'd bring her to, if I had my way."

So this was the brute that had got away with Miss Falkland, the day we were coming back from Bundah. Some horses, and a good many men and women, are all pretty right as long as they're well kept under and starved a bit at odd times. But give them an easy life and four feeds of corn a day, and they're troublesome brutes, and mischievous too.

It seems this mare came of a strain that had turned out more devils and killed more grooms and breakers than any other in the country. She was a Troubadour, it seems; there never was a Troubadour yet that wouldn't buck and bolt, and smash himself and his rider, if he got a fright, or his temper was roused. Men and women, horses and dogs, are very much alike. I know which can talk best. As to the rest, I don't know whether there's so much for us to be proud of.

It seems that this cranky wretch of a mare had been sideling and fidgeting when Mr. Falkland and his daughter started for their ride; but had gone pretty fairly—Miss Falkland, like my sister Aileen, could ride anything in reason—when suddenly a dead limb dropped off a tree close to the side of the road,

I believe she made one wild plunge, and set to; she propped and reared, but Miss Falkland sat her splendidly and got her head up. When she saw she could do nothing that way, she stretched out her head and went off as hard as she could lay legs to the ground.

She had one of those mouths that are not so bad when horses are going easy, but get quite callous when they are over-eager and excited. Anyhow, it was like trying to stop a mail-coach going down Mount Victoria with the brake off.

So what we saw was the wretch of a mare coming along as if the devil was after her, and heading straight across the plain at its narrowest part; it wasn't more than half-a-mile wide there, in fact, it was more like a flat than a plain. The people about Boree didn't see much open country, so they made a lot out of what they had.

The mare, like some women when they get their monkey up, was clean out of her senses, and I don't believe anything could have held her under a hide rope with a turn round a stockyard post. This was what she wanted, and if it had broken her infernal neck so much the better.

Miss Falkland was sitting straight and square, with her hands down, leaning a bit back, and doing her level best to stop the brute. Her hat was off and her hair had fallen down and hung down her back—plenty of it there was, too. The mare's neck was stretched straight out; her mouth was like a deal board, I expect, by that time.

We didn't sit staring at her all the time, you bet. We could see the boy ever so far off. We gathered up our reins and went after her, not in a hurry, but just collecting ourselves a bit to see what would be the best way to *wheel the brute* and stop her.

Jim's horse was far and away the fastest, and he let out to head the mare off from a creek that was just in front and at the end of the plain.

"By George!" said one of the men—a young fellow who lived near the place—"the mare's turning off her course, and she's heading straight for the Trooper's Downfall, where the policeman was killed. If she goes over that, they'll be smashed up like a matchbox, horse and rider."

"What's that?" I said, closing up alongside of him. We were all doing our best, and were just in the line to back up Jim, who looked as if he was overhauling the mare fast.

"Why, it's a bluff 100 feet deep—a straight drop—and rocks at the bottom. She's making as straight as a bee-line for it now, blast her!"

"And Jim don't know it," I said; "he's closing up to her, but he doesn't calculate to do it for a quarter of a mile more; he's letting her take it out of herself."

"He'll never catch her in time," said the young chap. "My God! it's an awful thing, isn't it; and a fine young lady like her—so kind to us chaps as she was."

"I'll see if I can make Jim hear," I said, for though I looked cool I was as nearly mad as I could be to think of such a girl being lost before our eyes. "No, I can't do that, but I'll *telegraph*."

CHAPTER X.

Now Jim and I had had many a long talk together about what we should do in case we wanted to signal to each other very *pressing*. We thought the time might

come some day when we might be near enough to sign, but not to speak. So we hit upon one or two things a little out of the common.

The first idea was, in case of one wanting to give the other the office that he was to look out his very brightest for danger, and not to trust to what appeared to be the state of affairs, the sign was to hold up your hat or cap straight over your head. If the danger threatened on the left, to shift to that side. If it was very pressing and on the jump, as it were, quite unexpected, and as bad as bad could be, the signalman was to get up on the saddle with his knees and turn half-round.

We could do this easy enough and a lot of circus tricks besides. How had we learned them? Why, in the long days we had spent in the saddle tailing the milkers and searching after lost horses for many a night.

As luck would have it Jim looked round to see how we were getting on, and up went my cap. I could see him turn his head and keep watching me when I put on the whole box and dice of the telegraph business. He "dropped," I could see. He took up the brown horse, and made such a rush to collar the mare that showed he intended to see for himself what the danger was. The cross-grained jade! She was a well-bred wretch, and be hanged to her! Went as if she wanted to win the Derby and gave Jim all he knew to challenge her. We could see a line of timber just ahead of her, and that Jim was riding for his life.

"By ——! they'll both be over it," said the young shearer. "They can't stop themselves at that pace, and they must be close up now."

"He's neck and neck," I said. "Stick to her, Jim, old man!"

We were all close together now. Several of the men knew the place, and the word had been passed round.

No one spoke for a few seconds. We saw the two horses rush up at top speed to the very edge of the timber.

"By Jove! they're over. No! he's reaching for her rein. It's no use. Now—now! She's saved! Oh, my God! they're both right. By the Lord, well done! Hurrah! One cheer more for Jim Marston!"

* * * * * *

It was all right. We saw Jim suddenly reach over as the horses were going stride and stride; saw him lift Miss Falkland from her saddle as if she had been a child and place her before him; saw the brown horse prop, and swing round on his haunches in a way that showed he had not been called the crack "cutting-out" horse on a big cattle run for nothing. We saw Jim jump to the ground and lift the young lady down. We saw only one horse.

Three minutes after Mr. Falkland overtook us, and we rode up together. His face was white, and his dry lips couldn't find words at first. But he managed to say to Jim, when we got up—

"You have saved my child's life, James Marston, and if I forget the service may God in that hour forget me. You are a noble fellow. You must allow me to show my gratitude in some way."

"You needn't thank me so out and out as all that, Mr. Falkland," said Jim, standing up very straight and looking at the father first, and then at Miss Falkland, who was pale and trembling, not altogether from fear, but excitement, and trying to choke back the sobs that would come out now and then. "I'd risk life and limb

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any day before Miss Falkland's finger should be scratched, let alone see her killed before my eyes. I wonder if there's anything left of the mare, poor thing; not that she don't deserve it all, and more."

Here we all walked forward to the deep creek bank. A yard or two further and the brown horse and his burden must have gone over the terrible drop, as straight as a plumb-line, on to the awful rocks below. We could see where the brown had torn up the turf as he struck all four hoofs deep into it at once. Indeed, he had been newly shod, a freak of Jim's about a bet with a travelling blacksmith. Then the other tracks, the long score on the brink—over the brink—where the frightened, maddened animal had made an attempt to alter her speed, all in vain, and had plunged over the bank and a hundred feet of fall.

We peered over, and saw a bright-coloured mass among the rocks below—very still. Just at the time one of the ration-carriers came by with a spring cart. Mr. Falkland lifted his daughter in and took the reins, leaving his horse to be ridden home by the ration-carrier. As for us we rode back to the shearers' hut, not quite so fast as we came, with Jim in the middle. He did not seem inclined to talk much.

"It's lucky I turned round when I did, Dick," he said at last, "and saw you making the 'danger-look-out-sharp' signal. I couldn't think what the dickens it was. I was so cock-sure of catching the mare in half-a-mile further that I couldn't help wondering what it was all about. Anyhow, I knew we agreed it was never to be worked for nothing, so thought the best thing I could do was to call in the mare, and see if I could find out any*thing* then. When I got alongside, I could see that Miss

Falkland's face was that white as something must be up. It weren't the mare she was afraid of. She was coming back to her. It took something to frighten her, I knew. So it must be something I did not know, or didn't see.

"'What is it, Miss Falkland?' I said.

"'Oh!' she cried out, 'don't you know? Another fifty yards and we'll be over the downfall where the trooper was killed. Oh, my poor father!'

"'Don't be afraid,' I said. 'We'll not go over if I can help it.'

"So I reached over and got hold of the reins. I pulled and jerked. She said her hands were cramped, and no wonder. Pulling double for a four-mile heat is no joke, even if a man's in training. Fancy a woman, a young girl, having to sit still and drag at a runaway horse all the time. I couldn't stop the brute; she was boring like a wild bull. So just as we came pretty close I lifted Miss Falkland off the saddle and yelled at old Brownie as if I had been on a cattle camp, swinging round to the near side at the same time. Round she came like one o'clock. I could see the mare make one prop to stop herself, and then go flying right through the air, till I heard a beastly 'thud' at the bottom.

"Miss Falkland didn't faint, though she turned white and then red, and trembled like a leaf when I lifted her down, and looked up at me with a sweet smile, and said—

"'Jim, you have paid me for binding up your wrist, haven't you? You have saved me from a horrible death, and I shall think of you as a brave and noble fellow all the days of my life.'

"What could I say?" said Jim. "I stared at her like a fool. 'I'd have gone over the bank with you, Miss Falkland,' I said, *'if I could* not have saved you.'

"'Well, I'm afraid some of my admirers would have stopped short of that, James,' she said. She did indeed. And then Mr. Falkland and all of you came up."

"I say, Jim," said one of the young fellows, "your fortune's made. Mr. Falkland 'll stand a farm, you may be sure, for this little fakement."

"And I say, Jack," says old Jim, very quiet like, "I've told you all the yarn, and if there's any chaff about it after this the cove will have to see whether he's best man or me; so don't make any mistake now."

There was no more chaff. They weren't afraid. There were two or three of them pretty smart with their hands, and not likely to take much from anybody. But Jim was a heavy weight and could hit like a horse kicking; so they thought it wasn't good enough, and left him alone.

Next day Mr. Falkland came down and wanted to give Jim a cheque for a hundred; but he wouldn't hear of so much as a note. Then he said he'd give him a billet on the run—make him under overseer; after a bit buy a farm for him and stock it. No! Jim wouldn't touch nothing or take a billet on the place. He wouldn't leave his family, he said. And as for taking money or anything else for saving Miss Falkland's life, it was ridiculous to think of it. There wasn't a man of the lot in the shed, down to the tarboy, that wouldn't have done the same, or tried to. All that was in it was that his horse was the fastest.

"It's not a bad thing for a poor man to have a fast horse now and then, is it, Mr. Falkland?" he said, looking up and smiling, just like a boy. He was very shy, was poor Jim.

"I don't grudge a poor man a good horse or anything *else he likes* to have or enjoy. You know that, all of you.

It's the fear I have of the effect of the dishonest way that horses of value are come by, and the net of roguery that often entangles fine young fellows like you and your brother; that's what I fear," said Mr. Falkland, looking at the pair of us so kind and pitiful like.

I looked him in the face, though I felt I could not say he was wrong. I felt, too, just then as if I could have given all the world to be afraid of no man's opinion.

What a thing it is to be perfectly honest and straight —to be able to look the whole world in the face!

But if more gentlemen were like Mr. Falkland I do really believe no one would rob them for very shame's sake. When shearing was over we were all paid up—shearers, washers, knock-about men, cooks, and extra shepherds. Every soul about the place except Mr. M'Intyre and Mr. Falkland seemed to have got a cheque and a walking-ticket at the same time. Away they went, like a lot of boys out of school; and half of 'em didn't show as much sense either. As for me and Jim we had no particular wish to go home before Christmas. So as there's always contracts to be let about a big run like Banda we took a contract for some bushwork, and went at it. Mr. M'Intyre looked quite surprised. But Mr. Falkland praised us up, and was proud we were going to turn over a new leaf.

Nobody could say at that time we didn't work. Fencing, dam-making, horse-breaking, stock-riding, from making hay to building a shed, all bushwork came easy enough to us, Jim in particular; he took a pleasure in it, and was never happier than when he'd had a real tearing day's work and was settling himself after his tea to a good steady smoke. A great smoker he'd come to be. He never was much for drinking except now and again,

and then he could knock it off as easy as any man I ever seen. Poor old Jim! He was born good and intended to be so, like mother. Like her, his luck was dead out in being mixed up with a lot like ours.

One day we were out at the back making some lambing yards. We were about twenty miles from the head station and had about finished the job. We were going in the next day. We had been camping in an old shepherd's hut and had been pretty jolly all by ourselves. There was first-rate feed for our horses, as the grass was being saved for the lambing season. Jim was in fine spirits, and as we had plenty of good rations and first-rate tobacco we made ourselves pretty comfortable.

"What a jolly thing it is to have nothing on your mind!" Jim used to say. "I hadn't once, and what a fine time it was! Now I'm always waking up with a start and expecting to see a policeman or that infernal half-caste. He's never far off when there's villainy on. Some fine day he'll sell us all, I really do believe."

"If he don't somebody else will; but why do you pitch upon him? You don't like him somehow; I don't see that he's worse than any other. Besides, we haven't done anything much to have a reward put on us."

"No! that's to come," answered Jim, very dismally for him. "I don't see what else is to come of it. Hist! isn't that a horse's step coming this way? Yes, and a man on him, too."

It was a bright night, though only the stars were out; but the weather was that clear that you could see ever so well and hear ever so far also. Jim had a blackfellow's hearing; his eyes were like a hawk's; he could see in about any light, and read tracks like a printed book.

I could hear nothing at first; then I heard a slight

ise a good way off, and a stick breaking every now d then.

"Talk of the devil!" growled Jim, "and here he comes. ɔelieve that's Master Warrigal, infernal scoundrel that is. Of course he's got a message from our respectle old dad or Starlight, asking us to put our heads in noose for them again."

"How do you know?"

"I know it's that ambling horse he used to ride," says n. "I can make out his sidling kind of way of using ; legs. All amblers do that."

"You're right," I said, after listening for a minute. can hear the regular pace, different from a horse's ılk."

"How does he know we're here, I wonder?" says Jim.

"Some of the telegraphs piped us, I suppose," I an-ered. "I begin to wish they forgot us altogether."

"No such luck," says Jim. "Let's keep dark and see ıat this black snake of a Warrigal will be up to. I ›n't expect he'll ride straight up to the door."

He was right. The horse hoofs stopped just inside thick bit of scrub, just outside the open ground on ıich the hut stood. After a few seconds we heard the y of the mopoke. It's not a cheerful sound at the dead night, and now, for some reason or other, it affected n and me in much the same manner. I remembered e last time I had heard the bird at home, just before : started over for Terrible Hollow, and it seemed uncky. Perhaps we were both a little nervous; we hadn't unk anything but tea for weeks. We drank it awfully ack and strong, and a great lot of it.

Anyhow, as we heard the quick light tread of the ›rse pacing in his two-feet-on-one-side-way over the

sandy, thin-grassed soil, every moment coming nearer and nearer, and this queer dismal-voiced bird hooting its hoarse deep notes out of the dark tree that swished and sighed-like in front of the sandhill, a queer feeling came over both of us that something unlucky was on the boards for us. We felt quite relieved when the horse's footsteps stopped. After a minute or so we could see a dark form creeping towards the hut.

CHAPTER XI.

WARRIGAL left his horse at the edge of the timber, for fear he might want him in a hurry, I suppose. He was pretty "fly," and never threw away a chance as long as he was sober. He could drink a bit, like the rest of us, now and then—not often—but when he did it made a regular devil of him—that is, it brought the devil out that lives low down in in most people's hearts. He was a worse one than usual, Jim said. He saw him once in one of his break-outs, and heard him boast of something he'd done. Jim never liked him afterwards. For the matter of that he hated Jim and me too. The only living things he cared about were Starlight and the three-cornered weed he rode, that had been a "brumbee," and wouldn't let anyone touch him, much less ride him, but himself. How he used to snort if a stranger came near him! He could kick the eye out of a mosquito, and bite, too, if he got the chance.

As for Warrigal, Starlight used to knock him down like a log if he didn't please him, but he never offered to turn upon him. He seemed to like it, and looked regular put out once when Starlight hurt his knuckles *against his* hard skull.

Us he didn't like, as I said before—why, I don't know —nor we him. Likes and dislikes are curious things. People hardly know the rights of them. But if you take a regular strong down upon a man or woman when you first see 'em it's ten to one that you'll find some day as you've good reason for it. We couldn't say what ground we had for hating the sight of Warrigal neither, for he was as good a tracker as ever followed man or beasts. He could read all the signs of the bush like a printed book. He could ride any horse in the world, and find his way, day or night, to any place he'd ever once been to in his life.

Sometimes we should have been hard pushed when we were making across country at night only for him. Hour after hour he'd ride ahead through scrub or forest, up hill or down dale, with that brute of a horse of his —he called him "Bilbah"—ambling away, till our horses, except Rainbow, used to shake the lives out of us jogging. I believe he did it on purpose.

He was a fine shot, and could catch fish and game in all sorts of ways that came in handy when we had to keep dark. He had pluck enough, and could fight a pretty sharp battle with his fists if he wasn't overweighted. There were white men that didn't at all find him a good thing if they went to bully him. He tried it on with Jim once, but he knocked the seven senses out of him inside of three rounds, and that satisfied him. He pretended to make up, but I was always expecting him to play us some dog's trick yet. Anyway, so far he was all right, and as long as Starlight and us were mixed up together he couldn't hurt one without the other. He came gliding up to the old hut in the dull light by bits of moves, just

as if he'd been a bush that had changed its place. We pretended to be asleep near the fire.

He peeped in through a chink. He could see us by the firelight, and didn't suppose we were watching him.

"Hullo, Warrigal!" sung out Jim, suddenly, "what's up now? Some devil's work, I suppose, or you wouldn't be in it. Why don't you knock at a gentleman's door when you come a visiting?"

"Wasn't sure it was you," he answered, showing his teeth; "it don't do to get sold. Might been troopers, for all I know."

"Pity we wasn't," said Jim; "I'd have the hobbles on you by this time, and you'd have got 'fitted' to rights. I wish I'd gone into the police sometimes. It isn't a bad game for a chap that can ride and track, and likes a bit of rough-and-tumble now and then."

"If I'd been a police tracker I'd have had as good a chance of nailing you, Jim Marston," spoke up Warrigal. "Perhaps I will some day. Mr. Garton wanted me bad once, and said they'd never go agin me for old times. But that says nothin'. Starlight's out at the back and the old man, too. They want you to go to them—sharp."

"What for?"

"Dunno. I was to tell you, and show the camp; and now gimme some grub, for I've had nothing since sunrise but the leg of a 'possum."

"All right," said Jim, putting the billy on; "here's some damper and mutton to go on with while the tea warms."

"Wait till I hobble out Bilbah; he's as hungry as I am, and thirsty too, my word."

"Take some out of the barrel; we shan't want it to-norrow," said Jim.

Hungry as Warrigal was—and when he began to eat thought he never would stop—he went and looked after iis horse first, and got him a couple of buckets of water ɔut of the cask they used to send us out every week. There was no surface water near the hut. Then he iobbled him out of a bit of old sheep-yard, and came in.

The more I know of men the more I see what curious umps of good and bad they're made up of. People that won't stick at anything in some ways will be that soft ind good-feeling in others—ten times more so than your egular good people. Anyone that thinks all mankind's livided into good, bad, and middlin', and that they can draft 'em like a lot of cattle—some to one yard, some to another—don't know much. There's a mob in most towns though, I think, that wants boilin' down bad. Some day they'll do it, maybe; they'll have to when all the good country's stocked up. After Warrigal had his supper he went out again to see his horse, and then coiled himself up before the fire and wouldn't hardly say another word.

"How far was it to where Starlight was?"

"Long way. Took me all day to come."

"Had he been there long?"

"Yes; had a camp there."

"Anybody else with him?"

"Three more men from this side."

"Did the old man say we were to come at once?"

"Yes, or leave it alone—which you liked."

Then he shut his eyes, and his mouth too, and was ɔoon as fast asleep as if he never intended to wake under ı week.

"What shall we do, *Jim?*" I said; "go or not?"

"If you leave it to me," says Jim, "I say, don't go. It's only some other cross cattle or horse racket. We're bound to be nobbled some day. Why not cut it now, and stick to the square thing? We couldn't do better than we're doing now. It's rather slow, but we'll have a good cheque by Christmas."

"I'm half a mind to tell Warrigal to go back and say we're not on," I said. "Lots of other chaps would join without making any bones about it."

"Hoo—hoo—hoo—hoo," sounded once more the night-bird from the black tree outside.

"D— the bird! I believe he's the devil in the shape of a mopoke! And yet I don't like Starlight to think we're afraid. He and the old man might be in a fix and want help. Suppose we toss up?"

"All right," says Jim, speaking rather slowly.

You couldn't tell from his face or voice how he felt about it; but I believe now—more than that, he let on once to me—that he was awfully cut up about my changing, and thought we were just in for a spell of straightforward work, and would stash the other thing for good and all.

We put the fire together. It burnt up bright for a bit. I pulled out a shilling.

"If it's head we go, Jim; if it's woman, we stay here."

I sent up the coin; we both bent over near the fire to look at it.

The head was uppermost.

"Hoo—hoo—hoo—hoo," came the nightbird's harsh croak.

There was a heavyish stake on that throw, if we'd only known. Only ruin—only death. Four men's lives *lost, and three* women made miserable for life.

Jim and I looked at one another. He smiled and opened the door.

"It's all the fault of that cursed owl, I believe," he said; "I'll have his life if he waits till it's daylight. We must be off early and get up our horses. I know what a long day for Warrigal and that ambling three-cornered devil of his means—70 or 80 miles, if it's a yard."

We slept sound enough till daybreak, and *could sleep* then, whatever was on the card. As for Jim, he slept like a baby always once he turned in. When I woke I got up at once. It was half dark; there was a little light in the east. But Warrigal had been out before me, and was leading his horse up to the hut with the hobbles in his hand.

Our horses were not far off, one of them had a bell on. Jim had his old brown, and I had a chestnut that I thought nearly as good. We weren't likely to have anything to ride that wasn't middlin' fast and plucky. Them that overhauled us would have to ride for it. We saddled up and took our blankets and what few things we couldn't do without. The rest stopped in the hut for anyone that came after us. We left our wages, too, and never asked for 'em from that day to this. A trifle like that didn't matter after what we were going in for. More's the pity.

As we moved off my horse propped once or twice, and Warrigal looked at us in a queer side sort of way and showed his teeth a bit—smile nor laugh it wasn't, only a way he had when he thought he knew more than we did.

"My word! your horses been where the feed's good. We're goin' a good way to-day. I wonder if they'll be as flash as they are now."

"They'll carry us wherever that three-cornered mule of yours will shuffle to to-night," said Jim. "Never you mind about them. You ride straight, and don't get up to any monkey tricks, or, by George, I'll straighten you, so as you'll know better next time."

"You know a lot, Jim Marston," said the half-caste, looking at him with his long dark sleepy eyes which I always thought were like a half-roused snake's. "Never mind, you'll know more one of these days. We'd better push on."

He went off at a hand-gallop, and then pulled back into a long darting kind of canter, which Bilbah thought was quite the thing for a journey—anyhow, he never seemed to think of stopping it—went on mile after mile as if he was not going to pull up this side of sundown. A wiry brute, always in condition, was this said Bilbah, and just at this time as hard as nails. Our horses had been doing nothing lately, and being on good young feed had, of course, got fat, and were rather soft.

After four or five miles they began to blow. We couldn't well pull up; the ground was hard in places and bad for tracking. If we went on at the pace we should cook our horses. As soon as we got into a bit of open I raced up to him.

"Now, look here, Warrigal," I said, "you know why you're doing this, and so do I. Our horses are not up to galloping 50 or 60 miles on end just off a spell and with no work for months. If you don't pull up and go our pace I'll knock you off your horse."

"Oh! you're riled!" he said, looking as impudent as he dared, but slackening all the same. "Pulled up before if I knowed your horses were getting baked. Thought *they were* up to anything, same as you and Jim."

"So they are. You'll find that one of these days. If there's work ahead you ought to have sense enough not to knock smoke out of fresh horses before we begin."

"All right. Plenty of work to do, my word. And Starlight said, 'Tell 'em to be here to-day if they can.' I know he's afraid of someone follerin' up our tracks, as it is."

"That's all right, Warrigal; but you ride steady all the same, and don't be tearing away through thick timber, like a mallee scrubber that's got into the open and sees the devil behind him until he can get cover again. We shall be there to-night if it's not 100 miles, and that's time enough."

We did drop in for a long day, and no mistake. We only pulled up for a short halt in the middle, and Warrigal's cast-iron pony was off again, as if he was bound right away for the other side of the continent. However, though we were not going slow either, but kept up a reasonable fast pace, it must have been past midnight when we rode into Starlight's camp; very glad Jim and I were to see the fire—not a big one either. We had been taking it pretty easy, you see, for a month or two, and were not quite so ready for an 80-mile ride as if we had been in something like training. The horses had had enough of it, too, though neither of them would give in, not if we'd ridden 'em 20 mile further. As for Warrigal's Bilbah he was near as fresh as when he started, and kept tossin' his head an' amblin' and pacin' away as if he was walkin' for a wager round a ring in a show-yard.

As we rode up we could see a gunya made out of boughs, and a longish wing of dogleg fence, made light but well put together. As soon as we got near enough

a dog ran out and looked as if he was going to worry us; didn't bark either, but turned round and waited for us to get off.

"It's old Crib," said Jim, with a big laugh; "blessed if it ain't. Father's somewhere handy. They're going to take up a back block and do the thing regular: Marston, Starlight, and Company—that's the fakement. They want us out to make dams or put up a woolshed or something. I don't see why they shouldn't, as well as Crossman and Fakesley. It's six of one and half-a-dozen of the other, as far as being on the square goes. Depend upon it, dad's turned over a new leaf."

"Do you fellows want anything to eat?" said a voice that I knew to be Starlight's. "If you do there's tea near the fire, and some grub in that flour bag. Help yourselves and hobble out your horses. We'll settle matters a bit in the morning. Your respected parent's abed in his own camp, and it's just as well not to wake him, unless you want his blessing ere you sleep."

We went with Starlight to his gunya. A path led through a clump of pines, so thick that a man might ride round it and never dream there was anything but more pines inside. A clear place had been made in the sandhill, and a snug crib enough rigged with saplings and a few sheets of bark. It was neat and tidy, like everything he had to do with. "I was at sea when I was young," he once said to Jim, when he was a bit "on," "and a man learns to be neat there." There was a big chimney outside, and a lot of leaves and rushes out of a swamp which he had made Warrigal gather.

"Put your blankets down there, boys, and turn in. *You'll* see how the land lies in the morning." We didn't

want asking twice, Jim's eyes were nigh shut as it was. The sun was up when we woke.

Outside the first thing we saw was father and Starlight talking. Both of these seemed a bit cranky. "It's a d— shame," we heard Starlight say, as he turned and walked off. "We could have done it well enough by ourselves."

"I know what I'm about," says father, "it's all or none. What's the use of crying after being in it up to our neck?"

"Some day you'll think different," says Starlight, looking back at him.

I often remembered it afterwards.

"Well, lads," says father, looking straight at us, "I wasn't sure as you'd come. Starlight has been barneying with me about sending for you. But we've got a big thing on now, and I thought you'd like to be in it."

"We have come," says I, pretty short. "Now we're here what's the play called, and when does the curtain rise? We're on." I was riled, vexed at Starlight talking as if we were children, and thought I'd show as we were men, like a young fool as I was.

"All right," says father, and he sat down on a log, and began to tell us how there was any quantity of cattle running at the back where they were camped—a good lot strayed and mixed up, from the last dry season, and had never been mustered for years. The stockmen hardly ever came out till the autumn musters. One of the chaps that was in it knew all this side and had told them. They were going to muster for a month or so, and drive the mob right through to Adelaide. Store cattle were dear then, and we could get them off easy there and come *back by sea*. No one was to know we

were not regular overlanders; and when we'd got the notes in our pockets it would be a hard matter to trace the cattle or prove that we were the men that sold 'em.

"How many head do you expect to get?" says Jim.

"A thousand or twelve hundred; half of 'em fat, and two-thirds of them young cattle."

"By George! that's something like a haul; but you can't muster such a lot as that without a yard."

"I know that," says father. "We're putting up a yard on a little plain about a mile from here. When they find it, it'll be an old nest, and the birds flown."

"Well, if that ain't the cheekiest thing I ever heard tell of," says I, laughingly. "To put up a yard at the back of a man's run, and muster his cattle for him! I never heard the like before, nor anyone else. But suppose the cove or his men come across it?"

"'Tain't no ways likely," says father. "They're the sleepiest lot of chaps in this frontage I ever saw. It's hardly worth while 'touching' them. There's no fun in it. It's like shooting pheasants when they ain't preserved. There's no risk, and when there's no risk there's no pleasure. Anyway that's my notion."

"Talking about risks, why didn't you work that Marquis of Lorne racket better? We saw in the papers that the troopers hunted you so close you had to kill him in the ranges."

Father looked over at us and then began to laugh—not long, and he broke off short. Laughing wasn't much in his line.

"Killed him, did we? And a horse worth nigh on to two thousand pounds. You ought to have known your old father better than that. We did kill *a* chestnut *horse, one* we picked out a purpose; white legs, white

knee, short under lip, everything quite regular. We even fed him for a week on prairie grass, just like the Marquis had been eating. Bless you, we knew how to work all that. We deceived Windhall his own self, and he thinks he's pretty smart. No! the Marquis is all safe—you know where."

I opened my eyes and stared at father.

"You've some call to crow if you can work things like that. How you ever got him away beats me; but not more than how you managed to keep him hid with a ring of troopers all round you from every side of the district."

"We had friends," father said. "Me and Warrigal done all the travelling by night. No one but him could have gone afoot, I believe, much less led a blood horse through the beastly scrub and ranges he showed us. But the devil himself could not beat him and that little brute Bilbah in rough country."

"I believe you," I said, thinking of our ride yesterday. "It's quite bad enough to follow him on level ground. But don't you think our tracks will be easy to follow with a thousand head of cattle before us? Any fool could do that."

"It ain't that as I'm looking at," said father; "of course an old woman could do it, and knit stockings all the time; but our dart is to be off and have a month's start before anybody knows they are off the run. They won't think of mustering before fat cattle takes a bit of a turn. That won't be for a couple of months yet. Then they may catch us if they can.

We had a long talk with Starlight, and what he said came to much the same. One stockman they had "squared," and he was to stand in. They had got two

or three flash chaps to help muster and drive, who were to swear they thought we were dealers, and had bought cattle all right. One or two more were to meet us further on. If we could get the cattle together and clear off before anything was suspected the rest was easy. The yard was nearly up, and Jim and I wired in and soon finished it. It didn't want very grand work putting into it as long as it would last our time. So we put it up roughly, but pretty strong, with pine saplings. The drawing in was the worst, for we had to "hump" the most of them ourselves. Jim couldn't help bursting out laughing from time to time.

"It does seem such a jolly cheeky thing," he said. "Driving off a mob of cattle on the quiet I've known happen once or twice; but I'm dashed if ever I heard tell of putting up duffing improvements of a superior class on a cove's run and clearing off with a thousand drafted cattle, all quiet and regular, and him pottering about his home-station and never 'dropping' to it no more than if he was in Sydney."

"People ought to look after their stock closer than they do," I said. "It is their fault almost as much as ours. But they are too lazy to look after their own work, and too miserable to pay a good man to do it for them. They just get a half-and-half sort of fellow that'll take low wages and make it up with duffing, and of course he's not likely to look very sharp after the back country."

"You're not far away," says Jim; "but don't you think they'd have to look precious sharp and get up very early in the morning to be level with chaps like father and Starlight, let alone Warrigal, who's as good by night as day? Then there's you and me. Don't try and make us out better than we are, Dick; we're all d— scoundrels, *that's* the truth of it, and honest men haven't a chance

with us, except in the long run—except in the long run. That's where they'll have us, Dick Marston."

"That's quite a long speech for you, Jim," I said; "but it don't matter much that I know of whose fault it is that we're in this duffing racket. It seems to be our fate, as the chap says in the book. We'll have a jolly spree in Adelaide if this journey comes out right. And now let's finish this evening off. To-morrow they're going to yard the first mob."

After that we didn't talk much except about the work. Starlight and Warrigal were out every day and all day. The three new hands were some chaps who formed part of a gang that did most of the horse-stealing in that neighbourhood, though they never showed up. The way they managed it was this. They picked up any good-looking nag or second-class racehorse that they fell across, and took them to a certain place. There they met another lot of fellows, who took the horses from them and cleared out to another colony; at the same time they left the horses they had brought. So each lot travelled different ways, and were sold in places where they were quite strange and no one was likely to claim them.

After a man had had a year or two at this kind of work, he was good, or rather bad, for anything. These young chaps, like us, had done pretty well at these games, and one of them, falling in with Starlight, had proposed to him to put up a couple of hundred head of cattle on Outer Back Momberah, as the run was called; then father and he had seen that a thousand were as easy to get as a hundred. Of course there was a risky feeling, but it wasn't such bad fun while it lasted. We were out all day running in the cattle. The horses were

in good wind and condition now; we had plenty of rations—flour, tea, and sugar. There was no cart, but some good packhorses, just the same as if we were a regular station party on our own run. Father had worked all that before we came. We had the best of fresh beef and veal too—you may be sure of that—there was no stint in that line; and at night we were always sure of a yarn from Starlight—that is, if he was in a good humour. Some times he wasn't, and then nobody dared speak to him, not even father.

He was an astonishing man, certainly. Jim and I used to wonder, by the hour, what he'd been in the old country. He'd been all over the world—in the Islands and New Zealand; in America, and among Malays and other strange people that we'd hardly ever heard of. Such stories as he'd tell us, too, about slaves and wild chiefs that he'd lived with and gone out to fight with against their enemy. "People think a great deal of a dead man now and then in this innocent country," he said once when the grog was uppermost; "why, I've seen fifty men killed before breakfast, and in cold blood, too, chopped up alive, or next thing to it; and a drove of slaves—men, women, and children—as big nearly as our mob, handed over to a slave-dealer, and driven off in chains just as you'd start a lot of station cattle. They didn't like it, going off their run either, poor devils. The women would try and run back after their pickaninnies when they dropped, just like that heifer when Warrigal knocked her calf on the head to-day." What a man he was! This was something like life, Jim and I thought. When we'd sold the cattle, if we got 'em down to Adelaide all right, we'd take a voyage to some foreign country, perhaps, and see sights too. What a paltry thing

working for a pound a week seemed when a rise like this was to be made!

Well, the long and short of it is that we mustered the cattle quite comfortably, nobody coming anext or anigh us any more than if we'd taken the thing by contract. You wouldn't have thought there was anybody nearer than Bathurst. Everything seemed to be in our favour. So it was, just at the start. We drafted out all the worst and weediest of the cattle, besides all the old cows, and when we counted the mob out we had nearly eleven hundred first rate store cattle; lots of fine young bullocks and heifers, more than half fat—altogether a prime well-bred mob that no squatter or dealer could fault in any way if the price was right. We could afford to sell them for a shade under market price for cash. Ready money, of course, we were bound to have.

Just as we were starting there was a fine roan bull came running up with a small mob.

"Cut him out, and beat him back," says father; "we don't want to be bothered with the likes of him."

"Why, I'm dashed if that ain't Hood's imported bull," says Billy the Boy, a Monaro native that we had with us. "I know him well. How's he come to get back? Why, the cove gave two hundred and fifty notes for him afore he left England, I've heard 'em say."

"Bring him along," said Starlight, who came up just then. "In for a penny, in for a pound. They'll never think of looking for him on the Coorong, and we'll be there before they miss any cattle worth talking about."

So we took "Fifteenth Duke of Cambridge" along with us; a red roan he was, with a little white about the flank. He wasn't more than four year old. He'd been brought out from England as a yearling. How he'd

worked his way out to this back part of the run, where a bull of his quality ain't often seen, nobody could say. But he was a lively active beast, and he'd got into fine hard fettle with living on saltbush, dry grass, and scrub for the last few months, so he could travel as well as the others. I took particular notice of him, from his little waxy horns to his straight locks and long square quarters. And so I'd need to—but that came after. He had only a little bit of a private brand on the shoulder. That was easily faked, and would come out quite different.

CHAPTER XII.

We didn't go straight ahead along any main track to the Lower Murray and Adelaide exactly. That would have been a little too open and barefaced. No; we divided the mob into three, and settled where to meet in about a fortnight. Three men to each mob. Father and Warrigal took one lot; they had the dog, old Crib, to help them. He was worth about two men and a boy. Starlight, Jim, and I had another; and the three stranger chaps another. We'd had a couple of knockabouts to help with the cooking and stockyard work. They were paid by the job. They were to stay at the camp for a week, to burn the gunyahs, knock down the yard, and blind the track as much as they could.

Some of the cattle we'd left behind they drove back and forward across the track every day for a week. If rain came they were to drop it, and make their way into the frontage by another road. If they heard about the job being blown or the police set on our track, they were to wire to one of the border townships we had to pass.

Weren't we afraid of their selling us? No, not much; they were well paid, and had often given father and Starlight information before, though they took care never to show out in the cattle or horse stealing way themselves. As long as chaps in our line have money to spend, they can always get good information and other things, too. It is when the money runs short that the danger comes in. I don't know whether cattle-duffing was ever done in New South Wales before on such a large scale, or whether it will ever be done again. Perhaps not. These wire fences stop a deal of cross-work; but it was done then, you take my word for it—a man's word as hasn't that long to live that it's worth while to lie—and it all came out right; that is as far as our getting safe over, selling the cattle, and having the money in our pockets.

We kept on working by all sorts of outside tracks on the main line of road—a good deal by night, too—for the first two or three hundred miles. After we crossed the Adelaide border we followed the Darling down to the Murray. We thought we were all right, and got bolder. Starlight had changed his clothes, and was dressed like a swell—away on a roughish trip, but still like a swell.

"They were his cattle; he had brought them from one of his stations on the Narran. He was going to take up country in the Northern Territory. He expected a friend out from England with a lot more capital."

Jim and I used to hear him talking like this to some of the squatters whose runs we passed through, as grave as you please. They used to ask him to stay all night, but he always said "he didn't like to leave his men. He made it a practice on the road." When we got within a

fortnight's drive of Adelaide, he rode in and lived at one of the best hotels. He gave out that he expected a lot of cattle to arrive, and got a friend that he'd met in the billiard-room (and couldn't he play surprisin'?) to introduce him to one of the leading stock agents there. So he had it all cut and dry, when one day Warrigal and I rode in, and the boy handed him a letter, touching his hat respectfully, as he had been learned to do, before a lot of young squatters and other swells that he was going out to a picnic with.

"My confounded cattle come at last," he says. "Excuse me for mentioning business. I began to hope they'd never come; 'pon my soul I did. The time passes so deuced pleasantly here. Well, they'll all be at the yards to-morrow. You fellows had all better come and see them sold. There'll be a little lunch, and perhaps some fizz. You go to the stock agents, Runnimall and Co.; here's their address, Jack," he says to me, looking me straight in the eyes. "They'll send a man to pilot you to the yards; and now off with you, and don't let me see your face till to-morrow."

How he carried it off! He cantered away with the rest of the party, as if he hadn't a thought in the world except about pleasure and honest business. Nobody couldn't have told that he wasn't just like them other young gentlemen with only their stock and station to think about, and a little fun at the races now and then. And what a risk he was running every minute of his life, he and all the rest of us. I wasn't sorry to be out of the town again. There were lots of police, too. Suppose one of them was to say, "Richard Marston, I arrest you for—" It hardly mattered what. I felt as if I should have tumbled down with sheer fright and cowardliness.

It's a queer thing you feel like that off and on. Other times a man has as much pluck in him as if his life was worth fighting for—which it isn't.

The agent knew all about us (or thought he did), and sent a chap to show Mr. Carisforth's cattle (Charles Carisforth, Esq., of Sturton, Yorkshire and Banda, Waroona, and Ebor Downs, New South Wales; that was the name he went by) the way to the yards. We were to draft them all next morning into separate pens—cows and bullocks, steers and heifers, and so on. He expected to sell them all to a lot of farmers and small settlers that had taken up a new district lately and were very short of stock.

"You couldn't have come into a better market, young fellow," says the agent's man to me. "Our boss he's advertised 'em that well as there'll be smart bidding between the farmers and some of the squatters. Good store cattle's been scarce, and these is in such rattling condition. That's what'll sell 'em. Your master seems a regular free-handed sort of chap. He's the jolliest squatter there's been in town these years, I hear folk say. Puts 'em in mind of Hawdon and Evelyn Sturt in the old overlander days."

Next day we were at the yards early, you bet. We wanted to have time to draft them into pens of twenty to fifty each, so that the farmers and small settlers might have a chance to buy. Besides, it was the last day of our work. Driving all day and watching half the night is pretty stiffish work, good weather and bad, when you've got to keep it up for months at a time, and we'd been three months and a week on the road.

The other chaps were wild for a spree. Jim and I had made up *our minds to* be careful; still, we had a

lot to see in a big town like Adelaide; for we'd never been to Sydney even in our lives, and we'd never seen the sea. That was something to look at for the first time, wasn't it?

Well, we got the cattle drafted to rights, every sort and size and age by itself, as near as could be. That's the way to draft stock, whether they're cattle, sheep, or horses; then every man can buy what he likes best, and isn't obliged to lump up one sort with another. We had time to have a bit of dinner. None of us had touched a mouthful since before daylight. Then we began to see the buyers come.

There'd been a big tent rigged, as big as a small woolshed, too. It came out in a cart, and then another cart came with a couple of waiters, and they laid out a long table of boards on trestles with a real first-class feed on it, such as we'd never seen in our lives before. Fowls and turkeys and tongues and rounds of beef, beer and wine in bottles with gilt labels on. Such a set-out it was. Father began to growl a bit. "If he's going to feed the whole country this way, he'll spend half the stuff before we get it, let alone drawing a down on the whole thing." But Jim and me could see how Starlight had been working the thing to rights while he was swelling it in the town among the big bugs. We told him the cattle would fetch that much more money on account of the lunch and the blowing the auctioneer was able to do. These would pay for the feed and the rest of the fal-lals ten times over. "When he gets in with men like his old pals he loses his head, I believe," father says, "and fancies he's what he used to be. He'll get 'fitted' quite simple some day if he doesn't keep a better look out."

That might be, but it wasn't to come about this time.

Starlight came riding out by-and-bye, dressed up like a real gentleman, and lookin' so different that Jim and I hardly dared speak to him—on a splendid horse too (not Rainbow, he'd been left behind; he was always left within a hundred miles of The Hollow, and he could do it in one day if he was wanted to), and a lot of fine dressed chaps with him—young squatters and officers, and what not. I shouldn't have been surprised if he'd had the Governor out with him. They told us afterwards he did dine at Government House reg'lar, and was made quite free and welcome there.

Well, he jumps down and shakes hands with us before them all. "Well, Jack! Well, Bill!" and so on, calls us his good faithful fellows, and how well we'd brought the cattle over; nods to father, who didn't seem able to take it all in; says he'll back us against any stockmen in Australia; has up Warrigal and shows him off to the company. "Most intelligent lad." Warrigal grinned and showed his white teeth. It was as good as a play.

Then everybody goes to lunch—swells and selectors, Germans and Paddies, natives and immigrants, a good many of them, too, and there was eating and drinking and speechifying till all was blue. By-and-bye the auctioneer looks at his watch. He'd had a pretty good tuck-in himself, and they must get to business.

Father opened his eyes at the price the first pen brought, all prime young bullocks, half fat most of them. Then they all went off like wildfire; the big men and the little men bidding, quite jealous, sometimes one getting the lot, sometimes another. One chap made a remark about there being such a lot of different brands; but Starlight said they'd come from a sort of depôt

station of his, and were the odds and ends of all the mobs of store cattle that he'd purchased the last four years. That satisfied 'em, particularly as he said it in a careless, fierce way which he could put on, as if it was like a man's——impudence to ask him anything. It made the people laugh; I could see that.

By-and-bye we comes to the imported bull. He was in a pen by himself, looking first rate. His brand had been faked, and the hair had grown pretty well. It would have took a sharp hand to know him again.

"Well, gentlemen," says the auctioneer, "here is the imported bull 'Duke of Brunswick.' It ain't often an animal of his quality comes in with a mob of store cattle; but I am informed by Mr. Carisforth that he left orders for the whole of the cattle to be cleared off the run, and this valuable animal was brought away in mistake. He was to return by sea; but as he happens to be here to-day, why, sooner than disappoint any intending buyer, Mr. Carisforth has given me instructions to put him up, and if he realizes anything near his value he will be sold."

"Yes!" drawls Starlight, as if a dozen imported bulls, more or less, made no odds to him, "put him up, by all means, Mr. Runnimall. Expectin' rather large shipment of Bates's 'Duchess' tribe next month. Rather prefer them on the whole. The 'Duke' here is full of Booth blood, so he may just as well go with the others. I shall never get what he cost, though; I know that. He's been a most expensive animal to me."

Many a true word is spoken in jest. He had good call to know him, as well as the rest of us, for a most expensive animal, before all was said and done. What he *cost us all* round it would be hard indeed to cipher up.

Anyhow, there was a great laugh at Starlight's easy way of taking it. First one and then another of the squatters that was going in for breeding began to bid, thinking he'd go cheap, until they got warm, and the bull went up to a price that we never dreamed he'd fetch. Everything seemed to turn out lucky that day. One would have thought they'd never seen an imported bull before. The young squatters got running one another, as I said before, and he went up to £270! Then the auctioneer squared off the accounts as sharp as he could; an' it took him all his time, what with the German and the small farmers, who took their time about it, paying in greasy notes and silver and copper, out of canvas bags, and the squatters, who were too busy chaffing and talking among themselves to pay at all. It was dark before everything was settled up, and all the lots of cattle delivered. Starlight told the auctioneer he'd see him at his office, in a deuced high and mighty kind of way, and rode off with his new friend.

All of us went back to our camp. Our work was over, but we had to settle up among ourselves and divide shares. I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw the cattle all sold and gone, and nothing left at the camp but the horses and the swags.

When we got there that night it was late enough. After tea father and I and Jim had a long yarn, settling over what we should do and wondering whether we were going to get clean away with our share of the money after all.

"By George!" says Jim, "it's a big touch, and no mistake. To think of our getting over all right, and selling out so easy, just as if they was our own cattle. Won't there *be a jolly* row when it's all out, and the

Momberah people miss their cattle?" (more than half 'em was theirs). "And when they muster they can't be off seein' they're some hundreds short."

"That's what's botherin' me," says father. "I wish Starlight hadn't been so thundering flash with it all. It'll draw more notice on us, and everyone 'll be gassin' about this big sale, and all that, till people's set on to ask where the cattle come from, and what not."

"I don't see as it makes any difference," I said. "Somebody was bound to buy 'em, and we'd have had to give the brands and receipts just the same. Only if we'd sold to anyone that thought there was a cross look about it, we'd have had to take half money, that's all. They've fetched a rattling price, through Starlight's working the oracle with those swells, and no mistake."

"Yes, but that ain't all of it," says the old man, filling his pipe. "We've got to look at what comes after. I never liked that imported bull being took. They'll rake all the colonies to get hold of him again, partic'ler as he sold for near three hundred pound."

"We must take our share of the risk along with the money," said Jim. "We shall have our whack of that according to what they fetched to-day. It'll be a short life and a merry one, though, dad, if we go on big licks like this. What'll we tackle next—a bank or Government House?"

"Nothing at all for a good spell, if you've any sense," growled father. "It'll give us all we know to keep dark when this thing gets into the papers, and the police in three colonies are all in full cry like a pack of beagles. The thing is, what'll be our best dart now?"

"I'll go back overland," says he. "Starlight's going *to take* Warrigal with him, and they'll be off to the

islands for a turn. If he knows what's best for him, he'll never come back. These other chaps say they'll separate and sell their horses when they get over to the Murray low down, and work their way up by degrees. Which way are you boys going?"

"Jim and I to Melbourne by next steamer," I said. "May as well see a bit of life now we're in it. We'll come back overland when we're tired of strange faces."

"All right," says father, "they won't know where I'm lyin' by for a bit, I'll go bail, and the sooner you clear out of Adelaide the better. News like ours don't take long to travel, and you might be nabbed very simple. One of ye write a line to your mother and tell her where you're off to, or she'll be frettin' herself and the gal too —frettin' over what can't be helped. But I suppose it's the natur' o' some women."

We done our settling-up next day. All the sale money was paid over to Starlight. He cashed the cheques and drew the lot in notes and gold—such a bundle of 'em there was. He brought them out to us at the camp, and then we "whacked" the lot. There were eight of us that had to share and share alike. How much do you think we had to divide? Why, not a penny under four thousand pounds. It had to be divided among the eight of us. That came to five hundred a man. A lot of money to carry about, that was the worst of it.

Next day there was a regular split and squander. We didn't wait long after daylight, you bet. Father was off and well on his way before the stars were out of the sky. He took Warrigal's horse, Bilbah, back with him; he and Starlight was going off to the islands together, and couldn't take horses with them. But he was real sorry to *part with the* cross-grained varmint; I thought

he was going to blubber when he saw father leading him off. Bilbah wouldn't go neither at first; pulled back, and snorted and went on as if he'd never seen only one man afore in his life. Father got vexed at last and makes a sign to old Crib; he fetches him such a "heeler" as gave him something else to think of for a few miles. He didn't hang back much after that.

The three other chaps went their own road. They kept very dark all through. I know their names well enough, but there's no use in bringing them up now.

Jim and I cuts off into the town, thinking we was due for a little fun. We'd never been in a big town before, and it was something new to us. Adelaide ain't as grand quite as Melbourne or Sydney, but there's something quiet and homelike about it to my thinking—great wide streets, planted with trees; lots of steady-going German farmers with their vineyards and orchards and droll little waggons. The women work as hard as the men, harder perhaps, and get brown and scorched up in no time—not that they've got much good looks to lose; leastways, none we ever saw.

We could always tell the German farmers' places along the road from one of our people by looking outside the door. If it was an Englishman or an Australian, you'd see where they'd throwed out the teapot leavings; if it was a German, you wouldn't see nothing. They drink their own sour wine, if their vines are old enough to make any, or else hop beer; but they won't lay out their money in the tea chest or sugar bag; no fear, or the grog either, and not far wrong. Then the sea! I can see poor old Jim's face now the day we went down to the port and he seen it for the first time.

"So we've got to the big waterhole at last," he said,

Don't it make a man feel queer and small to think of
:s going away right from here where we stand to the
ther side of the world? It's a long way across."

"Jim," says I, "and to think we've lived all our lives
p to this time and never set eyes on it before. Don't
: seem as if one was shut up in the bush, or tied to a
um tree, so as one can never have a chance to see any-
hing? I wonder we stayed in it so long."

"It's not a bad place, though it is rather slow and
ired in sometimes," says Jim. "We might be sorry
e ever left it yet. When does the steamer go to Mel-
ourne?"

"The day after to-morrow."

"I'll be glad to be clear off; won't you?"

We went to the theatre that night, and amused our-
elves pretty well next day and till the time came for
ur boat to start for Melbourne. We had altered our-
elves a bit, had our hair cut and our beards trimmed
y the hairdresser. We bought fresh clothes, and what
ith this, and the feeling of being in a new place and
aving more money in our pockets than we'd ever dreamed
bout before, we looked so transmogrified when we saw
urselves in the glass that we hardly knew ourselves.
Ve had to change our names, too, for the first time in
ur lives; and it went harder against the grain than
ou'd think, for all we were a couple of cattle-duffers,
ith a warrant apiece sure to be after us before the year
as out.

"It sounds ugly," says Jim, after we had given our
ames as John Simmons and Henry Smith at the hotel
here we put up at till the steamer was ready to start.
I never thought Jim Marston was to come to this—to be
fraid to tell a fat, greasy-looking fellow like that inn-

keeper what his real name was. Seems such a pitiful mean lie, don't it, Dick?".

"It isn't so bad as being called No. 14, No. 221, as they sing out for the fellows in Berrima gaol. How would you like that, Jim?"

"I'd blow my brains out first," cried out Jim, "or let some other fellow do it for me. It wouldn't matter which."

It was very pleasant, those two or three days in Adelaide, if they'd only lasted. We used to stroll about the lighted streets till all hours, watching the people and the shops and everything that makes a large city different from the country. The different sorts of people, the carts and carriages, buggies and drays, pony-carriages and spring-carts, all jumbled up together; even the fruit and flowers and oysters and fish under the gas lights seemed strange and wonderful to us. We felt as if we would have given all the world to have got mother and Aileen down to see it all. Then Jim gave a groan.

"Only to think," says he, "that we might have had all this fun some day, and bought and paid for it honest. Now it isn't paid for. It's out of some other man's pocket. There's a curse on it; it will have to be paid in blood or prison time before all's done. I could shoot myself for being such a cursed fool."

"Too late to think of that," I said; "we'll have some fun in Melbourne for a bit, anyhow. For what comes after we must 'chance it,' as we've done before, more than once or twice, either."

* * * * *

Next day our steamer was to sail. We got Starlight to come down with us and show us how to take our *passage*. We'd never done it before, and felt awkward

at it. He'd made up his mind to go to New Zealand, and after that to Honolulu, perhaps to America.

"I'm not sure that I'll ever come back, boys," he said, "and if I were you I don't think I would either. If you get over to San Francisco you'd find the Pacific Slope a very pleasant country to live in. The people and the place would suit you all to pieces. At any rate I'd stay away for a few years and wait till all this blows over."

I wasn't sorry when the steamer cleared the port, and got out of sight of land. There we were—where we'd never been before—in blue water. There was a stiff breeze, and in half-an-hour we shouldn't have turned our heads if we'd seen Hood and the rest of 'em come riding after us on seahorses, with warrants as big as the mainsail. Jim made sure he was going to die straight off, and the pair of us wished we'd never seen Outer Back Momberah, nor Hood's cattle, nor Starlight, nor Warrigal. We almost made up our minds to keep straight and square to the last day of our lives. However, the wind died down a bit next day, and we both felt a lot better —better in body and worse in mind—as often happens. Before we got to Melbourne we could eat and drink, smoke and gamble, and were quite ourselves again. We'd laid it out to have a reg'lar good month of it in town, takin' it easy, and stopping nice and quiet at a good hotel, havin' some reasonable pleasure. Why shouldn't we see a little life? We'd got the cash, and we'd earned that pretty hard. It's the hardest earned money of all, that's got on the cross, if fellows only knew, but they never do till it's too late.

When we got tired of doing nothing, and being in a strange place, we'd get across the border, above Albury somewhere, and work on the mountain runs till shearing

came round again, and we could earn a fairish bit of money. Then we'd go home for Christmas after it was all over, and see mother and Aileen again. How glad and frightened they'd be to see us. It wouldn't be safe altogether, but go we would.

CHAPTER XIII.

We got to Melbourne all right, and though it's a different sort of a place from Sydney, it's a jolly enough town for a couple of young chaps with money in their pockets. Most towns are, for the matter of that. We took it easy, and didn't go on the spree or do anything foolish. No, we weren't altogether so green as that. We looked out for a quiet place to lodge, near the sea—St. Kilda they call it, in front of the beach—and we went about and saw all the sights, and for a time managed to keep down the thought that perhaps sooner or later we'd be caught, and have to stand our trial for this last affair of ours, and maybe one or two others. It wasn't a nice thing to think of; and now and then it used to make both of us take an extra drop of grog by way of driving the thoughts of it out of our heads. That's the worst of not being straight and square. A man's almost driven to drink when he can't keep from thinking of all sorts of miserable things day and night. We used to go to the horse-yards now and then, and the cattle-yards too. It was like old times to see the fat cattle and sheep penned up at Flemington, and the butchers riding out on their spicy nags or driving trotters. But their cattle-yards was twice as good as ours, and me and Jim used often to wonder why the Sydney people hadn't managed to have something like them all these years, instead of

the miserable cockatoo things at Homebush that we'd often heard the drovers and squatters grumble about.

However, one day, as we was sitting on the rails, talking away quite comfortable, we heard one butcher say to another, "My word, this is a smart bit of cattle-duffing—a thousand head too!" "What's that?" says the other man. "Why, haven't you heard of it?" says the first one, and he pulls a paper out of his pocket, with this in big letters: "Great Cattle Robbery.—A thousand head of Mr. Hood's cattle were driven off and sold in Adelaide. Warrants are out for the suspected parties, who are supposed to have left the colony." Here was a bit of news! We felt as if we could hardly help falling off the rails; but we didn't show it, of course, and sat there for half-an-hour, talking to the buyers and sellers and cracking jokes like the others. But we got away home as soon as we could, and then we began to settle what we should do.

Warrants were out, of course, for Starlight, and us too. He was known, and so were we. Our descriptions were sure to be ready to send out all over the country. Warrigal they mightn't have noticed. It was common enough to have a black boy or a half-caste with a lot of travelling cattle. Father had not shown up much. He had an old pea-jacket on, and they mightn't have dropped down to him or the three other chaps that were in it with us; they were just like any other road hands. But about there being warrants out, with descriptions, in all the colonies, for a man to be identified, but generally known as Starlight, and for Richard and James Marston, we were as certain as that we were in St. Kilda, in a nice quiet little inn, overlooking the beach; and what a murder it was to have to leave it at all.

Leave the place we had to do at once. It wouldn't do to be strollin' about Melbourne with the chance of every policeman we met taking a look at us to see if we tallied with a full description they had at the office: "Richard and James Marston are twenty-five and twenty-two, respectively; both tall and strongly built; having the appearance of bush-men. Richard Marston has a scar on left temple. James Marston has lost a front tooth," and so on. When we came to think of it, they couldn't be off knowing us, if they took it into their heads to bail us up any day. They had our height and make. We couldn't help looking like bush-men—like men that had been in the open air all their lives, and that had a look as if saddle and bridle rein were more in our way than the spade and plough-handle. We couldn't wash the tan off our skins; faces, necks, arms, all showed pretty well that we'd come from where the sun was hot, and that we'd had our share of it. They had my scar, got in a row, and Jem's front tooth, knocked out by a fall from a horse when he was a boy; there was nothing for it but to cut and run.

"It was time for us to go, my boys," as the song the Yankee sailor sung us one night runs, and then, which way to go? Every ship was watched that close a strange rat couldn't get a passage, and, besides, we had that feeling we didn't like to clear away altogether out of the old country; there was mother and Aileen still in it, and every man, woman, and child that we'd known ever since we were born. A chap feels that, even if he ain't much good other ways. We couldn't stand the thought of clearin' out for America, as Starlight advised us. It was like death to us, so we thought we'd chance it somewhere in Australia for a bit longer.

Now where we put up a good many drovers from Gippsland used to stay, as they brought in cattle from there. The cattle had to be brought over Swanston Street Bridge and right through the town after twelve o'clock at night. We'd once or twice, when we'd been out late, stopped to look at them, and watched the big heavy bullocks and fat cows staring and starting and slipping all among the lamps and pavements, with the street all so strange and quiet, and laughed at the notion of some of the shop-keepers waking up and seeing a couple of hundred wild cattle, with three or four men behind 'em, shouldering and horning one another, then rushing past their doors at a hard trot, or breaking into a gallop for a bit.

Some of these chaps, seeing we was cattlemen and knew most things in that line, used to open out about where they'd come from, and what a grand place Gippsland was—splendid grass country, rivers that run all the year round, great fattening country; and snowy mountains at the back, keeping everything cool in the summer. Some of the mountain country, like Omeo, that they talked a lot of, seemed about one of the most out-of-the-way places in the world. More than that, you could get back to old New South Wales by way of the Snowy River, and then on to Monaro. After that we knew where we were.

Going away was easy enough, in a manner of speaking; but we'd been a month in Melbourne, and when you mind that we were not bad-looking chaps, fairishly dressed, and with our pockets full of money, it was only what might be looked for if we had made another friend or two besides Mrs. Morrison, the landlady of our inn, and Gippsland drovers. When we had time to turn round a

bit in Melbourne of course we began to make a few friends. Wherever a man goes, unless he keeps himself that close that he won't talk to anyone or let anyone talk to him, he's sure to find someone he likes to be with better than another. If he's old and done with most of his fancies, except smokin' and drinkin' it's a man. If he's young and got his life before him it's a woman. So Jim and I hadn't been a week in Melbourne before we fell across a couple of—well, friends—that we were hard set to leave. It was a way of mine to walk down to the beach every evening and have a look at the boats in the bay and the fishermen, if there were any—anything that might be going on. Sometimes a big steamer would be coming in, churning the water under her paddles and tearing up the bay like a hundred bunyips. The first screw-boat Jim and I saw we couldn't make out for the life of us what she moved by. We thought all steamers had paddles. Then the sailing boats, flying before the breeze like sea-gulls, and the waves, if it was a rough day, rolling and beating and thundering on the beach. I generally stayed till the stars came out before I went back to the hotel. Everything was so strange and new to a man who'd seen so little else except green trees that I was never tired of watching, and wondering, and thinking what a little bit of a shabby world chaps like us lived in that never seen anything but a slab hut, may-be, all the year round, and a bush public on high days and holidays.

Sometimes I used to feel as if we hadn't done such a bad stroke in cutting loose from all this. But then the horrible feeling would come back of never being safe, even for a day, of being dragged off and put in the dock, and maybe shut up for years. Sometimes I used to throw *myself* down upon the sand and curse the day when I

ever did anything that I had any call to be ashamed of and put myself in the power of everything bad and evil in all my life through.

Well, one day I was strolling along, thinking about these things, and wondering whether there was any other country where a man could go and feel himself safe from being hounded down for the rest of his life, when I saw a woman walking on the beach ahead of me. I came up with her before long, and as I passed her she turned her head and I saw she was one of two girls that we had seen in the landlady's parlour one afternoon. The landlady was a good, decent Scotch woman, and had taken a fancy to both of us (particularly to Jim—as usual). She thought—she was that simple—that we were up-country squatters from some far-back place, or overseers. Something in the sheep or cattle line everybody could see that we were. There was no hiding that. But we didn't talk about ourselves overmuch, for very good reasons. The less people say the more others will wonder and guess about you. So we began to be looked upon as bosses of some sort, and to be treated with a lot of respect that we hadn't been used to much before. So we began to talk a bit—natural enough—this girl and I. She was a good-looking girl, with a wonderful fresh clear skin, full of life and spirits, and pretty well taught. She and her sister had not been a long time in the country; their father was dead, and they had to live by keeping a very small shop and by dressmaking. They were some kind of cousins of the landlady and the same name, so they used to come and see her of evenings and Sundays. Her name was Kate Morrison and her sister's was Jeanie. This and a lot more she told me before we got back to the hotel,

where she said she was going to stay that night and keep Mrs. Morrison company.

After this we began to be a deal better acquainted. It all came easy enough. The landlady thought she was doing the girls a good turn by putting them in the way of a couple of hard-working well-to-do fellows like us; and as Jim and the younger one, Jeanie, seemed to take a fancy to each other, Mrs. Morrison used to make up boating parties, and we soon got to know each other well enough to be joked about falling in love and all the rest of it.

After a bit we got quite into the way of calling for Kate and Jeanie after their day's work was done, and taking them out for a walk. I don't know that I cared so much for Kate in those days anyhow, but by degrees we got to think that we were what people call in love with each other. It went deeper with her than me, I think. It mostly does with women. I never really cared for any woman in the world except Gracey Storefield, but she was far away, and I didn't see much likelihood of my being able to live in that part of the world, much less to settle down and marry there. So, though we'd broken a sixpence together and I had my half, I looked upon her as ever so much beyond me and out of my reach, and didn't see any harm in amusing myself with any woman that I might happen to fall across.

So, partly from idleness, partly from liking, and partly seeing that the girl had made up her mind to throw in her lot with me for good and all, I just took it as it came; but it meant a deal more than that, if I could have foreseen the end.

I hadn't seen a great many women, and had made up my mind that, except a few bad ones, they was mostly

one sort—good to lead, not hard to drive, and, above l, easy to see through and understand.

I often wonder what there was about this Kate Morson to make her so different from other women; but ıe was born unlike them, I expect. Anyway, I never et another woman like her. She wasn't out-and-out ındsome, but there was something very taking about ɛr. Her figure was pretty near as good as a woman's ɔuld be; her step was light and active; her feet and ınds were small, and she took a pride in showing them. never thought she had any temper different from other ɔmen; but if I'd noticed her eyes, surely I'd have seen there. There was something very strange and out of e way about them. They hardly seemed so bright hen you looked at them first; but by degrees, if she ɔt roused and set up about anything, they'd begin to ırn with a steady sort of glitter that got fiercer and ighter till you'd think they'd burn everything they looked . The light in them didn't go out again in a hurry, ther. It seemed as if those wonderful eyes would keep ı shining, whether their owner wished it or not.

I didn't find out all about her nature at once—trust woman for that. Vain and fond of pleasure I could ɛe she was; and from having been always poor, in a orrying, miserable, ill-contented way, she had got to be ungry for money and jewels and fine clothes; just like a erson that's been starved and shivering with cold longs ɔr a fire and a full meal and a warm bed. Some people ke these things when they can get them; but others ever seem to think about anything else, and would sell ıeir souls or do anything in the whole world to get what ıeir hearts are set on. When men are like this they're angerous, but *they hardly* hurt anybody, only themselves.

When women are born with hearts of this sort it's a bad look-out for everybody they come near. Kate Morrison could see that I had money. She thought I was rich, and she made up her mind to attract me, and go shares in my property, whatever it might be. She won over her younger sister, Jeanie, to her plans, and our acquaintance was part of a regular put-up scheme. Jeanie was a soft, good-tempered, good-hearted girl, with beautiful fair hair, blue eyes, and the prettiest mouth in the world. She was as good as she was pretty, and would have worked away without grumbling in that dismal little shop from that day to this, if she'd been let alone. She was only just turned seventeen. She soon got to like Jim a deal too well for her own good, and used to listen to his talk about the country across the border, and such simple yarns as he could tell her, poor old Jim! until she said she'd go and live with him under a salt-bush if he'd come back and marry her after Christmas. And of course he did promise. He didn't see any harm in that. He intended to come back if he could, and so did I for that matter. Well, the long and short of it was that we were both regularly engaged and had made all kinds of plans to be married at Christmas and go over to Tasmania or New Zealand, when this terrible blow fell upon us like a shell. I did see one explode at a review in Melbourne —and, my word! what a scatteration it made.

Well, we had to let Kate and Jeanie know the best way we could that our business required us to leave Melbourne at once, and that we shouldn't be back till after Christmas, if then.

It was terrible hard work to make out any kind of a story that would do. Kate questioned and cross-ques*tioned me* about the particular kind of business that

called us away like a lawyer (I've seen plenty of that since) until at last I was obliged to get a bit cross and refuse to answer any more questions.

Jeanie took it easier, and was that down-hearted and miserable at parting with Jim that she hadn't the heart to ask any questions of anyone, and Jim looked about as dismal as she did. They sat with their hands in each other's till it was nearly twelve o'clock, when the old mother came and carried the girls off to bed. We had to start at daylight next morning; but we made up our minds to leave them a hundred pounds apiece to keep for us until we came back, and promised if we were alive to be at St. Kilda next January, which they had to be contented with.

Jeanie did not want to take the money; but Jim said he'd very likely lose it, and so persuaded her.

We were miserable and low-spirited enough ourselves at the idea of going away all in a hurry. We had come to like Melbourne, and had bit by bit cheated ourselves into thinking that we might live comfortably and settle down in Victoria, out of reach of our enemies, and perhaps live and die unsuspected.

From this dream we were roused up by the confounded advertisement. Detectives and constables would be seen to be pretty thick in all the colonies, and we could not reasonably expect not to be taken some time or other, most likely before another week.

We thought it over and over again, in every way. The more we thought over it the more dangerous it seemed to stop in Melbourne. There was only one thing for it, that was to go straight out of the country. The Gippsland men were the only bush-men we knew at all well, and perhaps that door might shut soon.

So we paid our bill. They thought us a pair of quiet, respectable chaps at that hotel, and never would believe otherwise. People may say what they like, but it's a great thing to have some friends that can say of you—

"Well, I never knew no harm of him; a better tempered chap couldn't be; and all the time we knowed him he was that particular about his bills and money matters that a banker couldn't have been more regular. He may have had his faults, but we never seen 'em. I believe a deal that was said of him wasn't true, and nothing won't ever make me believe it."

These kind of people will stand up for you all the days of your life, and stick to you till the very last moment, no matter what you turn out to be. Well, there's something pleasant in it; and it makes you think human nature ain't quite such a low and paltry thing as some people tries to make out. Anyhow, when we went away our good little landlady and her sister was that sorry to lose us, as you'd have thought they was our blood relations. As for Jim, everyone in the house was fit to cry when he went off, from the dogs and cats upwards. Jim never was in no house where everybody didn't seem to take naturally to him. Poor old Jim!

We bought a couple of horses, and rode away down to Sale with these chaps that had sold their cattle in Melbourne and was going home. It rained all the way, and it was the worst road by chalks we'd ever seen in our lives; but the soil was wonderful, and the grass was something to talk about; we'd hardly ever seen anything like it. A few thousand acres there would keep more stock than half the country we'd been used to.

We didn't stay more than a day or so in Sale. Every *morning at* breakfast someone was sure to turn up the

paper and begin jabbering about the same old infernal business, Hood's cattle, and what a lot were taken, and whether they'll catch Starlight and the other men, and so on.

We heard of a job at Omeo while we were in Sale, which we thought would just about suit us. All the cattle on a run there were to be mustered and delivered to a firm of stock agents that had bought them; they wanted people to do it by contract at so much a head. Anybody who took it must have money enough to buy stock horses. The price per head was pretty fair, what would pay well, and we made up our minds to go in for it.

So we made a bargain; bought two more horses each, and started away for Omeo. It was near 200 miles from where we were. We got up there all right, and found a great rich country with a big lake, I don't know how many feet above the sea. The cattle were as wild as hares, but the country was pretty good to ride over. We were able to keep our horses in good condition in the paddocks, and when we had mustered the whole lot we found we had a handsome cheque to get.

It was a little bit strange buckling to after the easy life we'd led for the last few months; but after a day or two we found ourselves as good men as ever, and could spin over the limestone boulders and through the thick mountain timber as well as ever we did. A man soon gets right again in the fresh air of the bush; and as it used to snow there every now and then the air was pretty fresh, you bet, particularly in the mornings and evenings.

After we'd settled up we made up our minds to get as far as Monaro, and wait there for a month or two. After that we might go in for the shearing till Christmas,

and then whatever happened we would both make a strike back for home, and have one happy week, at any rate, with mother and Aileen.

We tried as well as we could to keep away from the large towns and the regular mail coach road. We worked on runs where the snow came down every now and then in such a way as to make us think that we might be snowed up alive some fine morning. It was very slow and tedious work, but the newspaper seldom came there, and we were not worried day after day with telegrams about our Adelaide stroke, and descriptions of Starlight's own look and way of speaking. We got into the old way of working hard all day and sleeping well at night. We could eat and drink well; the corned beef and the damper were good, and Jim, like when we were at the back of Boree when Warrigal came, wished that we could stick to this kind of thing always, and never have any fret or crooked dealings again as long as we lived.

But it couldn't be done. We had to leave and go shearing when the spring came on. We did go, and went from one big station to the other when the spring was regularly on and shearers were scarce. By-and-by the weather gets warmer, and we had cut our last shed before the first week in December.

Then we couldn't stand it any longer.

"I don't care," says Jim, "if there's a policeman standing at every corner of the street, I must make a start for home. They may catch us, but our chance is a pretty good one; and I'd just as soon be lagged outright as have to hide and keep dark and moulder away life in some of these God-forsaken spots."

So we made up to start for home and chance it. We *worked* our way by degrees up the Snowy River, by

Buchan and Galantapee, and gradually made towards Balooka and Buckley's Crossing. On the way we crossed some of the roughest country we had ever seen or ridden over.

"My word, Dick," said Jim one day, as we were walking along and leading our horses, "we could find a place here if we were hard pushed, near as good for hiding in as the Hollow. Look at that bit of tableland that runs up towards Black Mountain, any man that could find a track up to it might live there for a year and all the police of the country be after him."

"What would he get to eat if he was there?"

"That long chap we stayed with at Wargulmerang told us that there were wild cattle on all those tablelands. Often they get snowed up in winter and die, making a circle in the snow. Then fish in all the creeks, besides the old Snowy, and there are places on the south side of him that people didn't see once in five years. I believe I shall make a camp for myself on the way, and live in it till they've forgot all about these cursed cattle. Rot their hides, I wish we'd never have set eyes on one of them."

"So do I; but like many things in the world it's too late—too late, Jim!"

CHAPTER XIV.

One blazing hot day in the Christmas week Jim and I rode up the "gap" that led from the Southern road towards Rocky Creek and the little flat near the water where our hut stood. The horses were tired, for we'd ridden a long way, and not very slow either, to get to

the old place. How small and queer the old homestead looked, and everything about it after all we had seen. The trees in the garden were in full leaf, and we could see that it was not let go to waste. Mother was sitting in the verandah sewing, pretty near the same as we went away, and a girl was walking slowly up from the creek carrying a bucket of water. It was Aileen. We knew her at once. She was always as straight as a rush, and held her head high, as she used to do; but she walked very slow, and looked as if she was dull and weary of everything. All of a sudden Jim jumped off, dropped his horse's bridle on the ground, and started to run towards her. She didn't see him till he was pretty close; then she looked up astonished-like, and put her bucket down. She gave a sudden cry and rushed over to him; the next minute she was in his arms, sobbing as if her heart would break.

I came along quiet. I knew she'd be glad to see me —but, bless you, she and mother cared more for Jim's little finger than for my whole body. Some people have a way of gettin' the biggest share of nearly everybody's liking that comes next or anigh 'em. I don't know how it's done, or what works it. But so it is; and Jim could always count on every man, woman, and child, wherever he lived, wearing his colours and backing him right out, through thick and thin.

When I came up Aileen was saying—

"Oh, Jim, my dear old Jim! now I'll die happy; mother and I were only talking of you to-day, and wondering whether we should see you at Christmas—and now you have come. Oh, Dick! and you too. But we shall be frightened every time we hear a horse's tread or dog's *bark.*"

"Well, we're here now, Aileen, and that's something. I had a great notion of clearing out for San Francisco and turning Yankee. What would you have done then?"

We walked up to the house, leading our horses, Jim and Aileen hand in hand. Mother looked up and gave a scream; she nearly fell down; when we got in her face was as white as a sheet.

"Mother of Mercy! I vowed to you for this," she said; "sure she hears our prayers. I wanted to see ye both before I died, and I didn't think you'd come. I was afraid ye'd be dreadin' the police, and maybe stray away for good and all. The Lord be thanked for all His mercies!"

We went in and enjoyed our tea. We had had nothing to eat that day since breakfast; but better than all was Aileen's pleasant, clever tongue, though she said it was getting stiff for want of exercise. She wanted to know all about our travels, and was never tired of listening to Jim's stories of the wonders we had seen in the great cities and the strange places we had been to.

"Oh! how happy you must have been!" she would say, "while we have been pining and wearying here, all through last spring and summer, and then winter again —cold and miserable it was last year; and now Christmas has come again. Don't go away again for a good while, or mother and I'll die straight out."

Well, what could we say? Tell her we'd never go away at all if we could help it—only she must be a good girl and make the best of things, for mother's sake? When had she seen father last?

"Oh! he was away a good while once; that time you and Jim were at Mr. Falkland's back country. You must have had a long job then; no wonder you've got such

good clothes and look so smartened up like. He comes every now and then, just like he used. We never know what's become of him."

"When was he here last?"

"Oh! about a month ago. He said he might be here about Christmas; but he wasn't sure. And so you saved Miss Falkland from being killed off her horse, Jim? Tell me all about it, like a good boy, and what sort of a looking young lady is she?"

"All right," said Jim. "I'll unload the story bag before we get through; there's a lot in there yet; but I want to look at you and hear you talk just now. How's George Storefield?"

"Oh! he's just the same good, kind, steady-going fellow he always was," says she. "I don't know what we should do without him when you're away. He comes and helps with the cows now and then. Two of the horses got into Bargo pound, and he went and released them for us. Then a storm blew off best part of the roof of the barn, and the bit of wheat would have been spoiled only for him. He's the best friend we have."

"You'd better make sure of him for good and all," I said. "I suppose he's pretty well-to-do now with that new farm he bought the other day."

"Oh! you saw that," she said. "Yes; he bought out the Cumberers. They never did any good with Honeysuckle Flat, though the land was so good. He's going to lay it all down in lucerne, he says."

"And then he'll smarten up the cottage, and sister Aileen'll go over, and live in it," says Jim; "and a better thing she couldn't do."

"I don't know," she said. "Poor George, I wish I *was fonder* of him. There never was a better man, I

believe; but I cannot leave mother yet, so it's no use talking." Then she got up and went in.

"That's the way of the world," says Jim. "George worships the ground she treads on, and she can't make herself care two straws about him. Perhaps she will in time. She'll have the best home and the best chap in the whole district if she does."

"There's a deal of 'if' in this world," I said; "and if' we're 'copped' on account of that last job, I'd like to think she and mother had someone to look after them, good weather and bad."

"We might have done that, and not killed ourselves with work either," said Jim, rather sulkily for him; and he lit his pipe and walked off into the bush without saying another word.

I thought, too, how we might have been ten times, twenty times, as happy if we'd only kept on steady ding-dong work, like George Storefield, having patience and seeing ourselves get better off—even a little—year by year. What had he come to? And what lay before us? And though we were that fond of poor mother and Aileen that we would have done anything in the world for them —that is, we would have given our lives for them any day—yet we had left them—father, Jim, and I—to lead this miserable, lonesome life, looked down upon by a lot of people not half good enough to tie their shoes, and obliged to a neighbour for help in every little distress.

Jim and I thought we'd chance a few days at home, no matter what risk we ran; but still we knew that if warrants were out the old home would be well watched, and that it was the first place the police would come to. So we made up our minds not to sleep at home, but to go away every night to an old deserted shepherd's hut,

a couple of miles up the gully, that we used to play in when we were boys. It had been strongly built at first; time was not much matter then, and there were no wages to speak of, so that it was a good shelter. The weather was that hot, too, it was just as pleasant sleeping under a tree as anywhere else. So we didn't show at home more than one at a time, and took care to be ready for a bolt at any time, day or night, when the police might show themselves. Our place was middling clear all round now, and it was hard for anyone on horseback to get near it without warning; and if we could once reach the gully we knew we could run faster than any man could ride.

One night, latish, just as we were walking off to our hut there was a scratching at the door; when we opened it there was old Crib! He ran up to both of us and smelt round our legs for a minute to satisfy himself; then jumped up once to each of us as if he thought he ought to do the civil thing, wagged his stump of a tail, and laid himself down. He was tired, and had come a long way. We could see that, and that he was footsore too. We knew that father wasn't so very far off, and would soon be in. If there'd been anybody strange there Crib would have run back fast enough; then father'd have dropped there was something up and not shown. No fear of the dog not knowing who was right and who wasn't. He could tell every sort of a man a mile off, I believe. He knew the very walk of the police troopers' horses, and would growl, father said, if he heard their hoofs rattle on the stones of the road.

About a quarter of an hour after father walks in, quiet as usual. Nothing never made no difference to him, except he thought it was worth while. He was *middlin'* glad to see us, and behaved kind enough to

mother, so the poor soul looked quite happy for her. It was little enough of that she had for her share. By-and-by father walks outside with us, and we had a long private talk.

It was a brightish kind of starlight night. As we walked down to the creek I thought how often Jim and I had come out on just such a night 'possum hunting, and came home so tired that we were hardly able to pull our boots off. Then we had nothing to think about when we woke in the morning but to get in the cows; and didn't we enjoy the fresh butter and the damper and bacon and eggs at breakfast time! It seems to me the older people get the more miserable they get in this world. If they don't make misery for themselves other people do it for 'em; or just when everything's going straight, and they're doing their duty first rate and all that, some accident happens 'em just as if they was the worst people in the world. I can't make it out at all.

"Well, boys," says dad, "you've been lucky so far; suppose you had a pretty good spree in Melbourne? You seen the game was up by the papers, didn't you? But why didn't you stay where you were?"

"Why, of course, that brought us away," says Jim; "we didn't want to be fetched back in irons, and thought there was more show for it in the bush here."

"But even if they'd grabbed Starlight," says the old man, "you'd no call to be afeard. Not much chance of his peaching, if it had been a hanging matter."

"You don't mean to say there ain't warrants against us and the rest of the lot?" I said.

"There's never a warrant out agin anyone but Starlight," said the old man. "I've had the papers read to me regular, and I rode over to Bargo and saw the reward

of £200 (a chap alongside of me read it) as is offered for a man generally known as Starlight, supposed to have left the country; but not a word about you two and me, or the boy, or them other coves."

"So we might as well have stayed where we were, Jim." Jim gave a kind of a groan. "Still, when you look at it, isn't it queer," I went on, "that they should only spot Starlight and leave us out? It looks as if they was keepin' dark for fear of frightening us out of the country, but watching all the same."

"It's this way I worked it," says father, rubbing his tobacco in his hands the old way, and bringing out his pipe: "they couldn't be off marking down Starlight along of his carryin' on so. Of course he drawed notice to himself all roads. But the rest of us only come in with the mob, and soon as they was sold stashed the camp and cleared out different ways. Them three fellers is in Queensland long ago, and nobody was to know them from any other road hands. I was back with the old mare and Bilbah in mighty short time. I rode 'em night and day, turn about, and they can both travel. You kept pretty quiet, as luck had it, and was off to Melbourne quick. I don't really believe they dropped to any of us, bar Starlight; and if they don't nab him we might get shut of it altogether. I've known worse things as never turned up in this world, and never will now." Here the old man showed his teeth as if he were going to laugh, but thought better of it.

"Anyhow, we'd made it up to come home at Christmas," says Jim; "but it's all one. It would have saved us a deal of trouble in our minds all the same if we'd known there was no warrants out after us two. I wonder *if they*'ll nail Starlight."

"They can't well be off it," says father. "He's gone off his head, and stopped in some swell town in New Zealand—Canterbury, I think it's called—livin' tiptop among a lot of young English swells, instead of makin' off for the Islands as he laid out to do."

"How do you know he's there?" I said.

"I know, and that's enough," snarls father. "I hear a lot in many ways about things and people that no one guesses on, and I know this—that he's pretty well marked down by old Stillbrook the detective as went down there a month ago."

"But didn't you warn him?"

"Yes, of course, as soon as I heard tell; but it's too late, I'm thinking. He has the devil's luck as well as his own, but I always used to tell him it would fail him yet."

"I believe you're the smartest man of the crowd, dad," says Jim, laying his hand on father's shoulder. He could pretty nigh get round the old chap once in a way, could Jim, surly as he was. "What do you think we'd better do? What's our best dart?"

Father shook off his hand, but not roughly, and his voice wasn't so hard when he said—

"Why, stop at home quiet, of course, and sleep in your beds at night. Don't go planting in the gully, or someone 'll think you're wanted, and let on to the police. Ride about the country till I give you the office. Never fear but I'll have word quick enough. Go about and see the neighbours round just as usual."

Jim and I was quite stunned by this bit of news; no doubt we was pretty sorry as ever we left Melbourne, but there was nothing for it now but to follow it out. After all, we were at *home, and it* was pleasant to think we

wouldn't be hunted for a bit and might ride about old place and enjoy ourselves a bit. Aileen was as ha as the day was long, and poor mother used to lay head on Jim's neck and cry for joy to have him with Even father used to sit in the front, under the quir and smoke his pipe, with old Crib at his feet, most : he thought he was happy. I wonder if he ever loo back to the days when he was a farmin' boy and ha took to poaching? He must have been a smart, ha kind of lad, and what a different look his face must h had then!

We had our own horses in pretty good trim, so foraged up Aileen's mare, and made it up to ride (to George Storefield's, and gave him a look-up. H been away when we came, and now we heard he home.

"George has been doing well all this time, of cour I said. "I expect he'll turn squatter some day and made a magistrate."

"Like enough," says Jim. "More than one we cc pick began lower down than him, and sits on the Be and gives coves like us a turn when we're brought before 'em. Fancy old George sayin', 'Is anything kno constable, of this prisoner's anterseedents?' as I heard Higgler say one day at Bargo."

"Why do you make fun of these things, Jim, dea says Aileen, looking so solemn and mournful l "Oughtn't a steady worker to rise in life, and isn't it to see cleverer men and better workers—if they liked kept down by their own fault?"

"Why wasn't your roan mare born black or chestnut *says* Jim, laughing, and pretending to touch her

Come along, and lets see if she can trot as well as she ed to do?"

"Poor Lowan," says she, patting the mare's smooth ck (she was a wonderful neat, well-bred, dark roan, th black points—one of dad's, perhaps, that he'd ought her home one time he was in special good mour about something. Where she was bred or how, body ever knew); "she was born pretty and good. How tle trouble her life gives her. It's a pity we can't all y as much, or have as little on our minds."

"Whose fault's that?" says Jim. "The dingo must e as well as the collie or the sheep either. One's been ade just the same as the other. I've often watched a ngo turn round twice, and then pitch himself down in e long grass like as if he was dead. He's not a bad rt, old dingo, and has a good time of it as long as it sts."

"Yes, till he's trapped or shot or poisoned some day, hich he always is," said Aileen, bitterly. "I wonder y man should be content with a wicked life and a ameful death." And she struck Lowan with a switch, d spun down the slope of the hill between the trees e a forester-doe with the hunter-hound behind her.

When we came up with her she was all right again, d tried to smile. Whatever put her out for the time e always worked things by kindness, and would lead straight if she could. Driven, she knew we couldn't ; and I believe she did us about ten times as much od that way as if she had scolded and raged, or even eered at us.

When we rode up to Mr. Storefield's farm we were ite agreeable and pleasant again, Jim makin' believe ; horse could walk *fastest,* and saying that her mare's

pace was only a double shuffle of an amble like Bil and she declaring that the mare's was a true walk- so it was. The mare could do pretty well everythin talk, and all her paces were first-class.

Old Mrs. Storefield was pottering about in the den with a big sun-bonnet on. She was a great w for flowers.

"Come along in, Aileen, my dear," she said. "Gr in the dairy; she'll be out directly. George only home yesterday. Who be these you've got with ye? Dick!" she says, lookin' again with her sharp, old, eyes, "it's you, boy, is it? Well, you've changed a too; and Jim too. Is he as full of mischief as Well, God bless you, boys, I wish you well! I wis well. Come in out of the sun, Aileen; and one o take the horses up to the stable. You'll find G there somewhere."

Aileen had jumped down by this time, and thrown her rein to Jim, so we rode up to the stable a very good one it was, not long put up, that we see. How the place had changed, and how differ was from ours! We remembered the time when hut wasn't a patch on ours, when old Isaac Store that had been gardener at Mulgoa to some of the gentlemen in the old days, had saved a bit of mone taken up a farm; but bit by bit their place had getting better and bigger every year, while ours had still and now was going back.

CHAPTER XV.

GEORGE STOREFIELD'S place, for the old man was *and* all the place belonged to him and Gracey,

stunned Jim and me. We'd been away more than a year, and he'd pulled down the old fences and put up new ones —first-rate work it was too; he was always a dead hand at splitting. Then there was a big hay-shed, chockfull of good sweet hay and wheat sheaves, and, last of all, the new stable, with six stalls and a loft above, and racks, all built of ironbark slabs, as solid and reg'lar as a church, Jim said.

They'd a good six-roomed cottage and a new garden fence ever so long. There were more fruit trees in the garden and a lot of good draught horses standing about, that looked well, but as if they'd come off a journey.

The stable door opens, and out comes old George as hearty as ever, but looking full of business.

"Glad to see you, boys," he says; "what a time you've been away! Been away myself these three months with a lot of teams carrying. I've taken greatly to the business lately. I'm just settling up with my drivers, but put the horses in, there's chaff and corn in the mangers, and I'll be down in a few minutes. It's well on to dinner-time, I see."

We took the bridles off and tied up the horses—there was any amount of feed for them—and strolled down to the cottage again.

"Wonder whether Gracey's as nice as she used to be," says Jim. "Next to Aileen I used to think she wasn't to be beat. When I was a little chap I believed you and she must be married for certain. And old George and Aileen. I never laid out anyone for myself, I remember."

"The first two don't look like coming off," I said.

"You're the likeliest man to marry and settle if Jeanie sticks to you."

"She'd better go down to the pier and drown herself comfortably," said Jim. "If she knew what was before us all, perhaps she would. Poor little Jeanie! We'd no right to drag other people into our troubles. I believe we're getting worse and worse. The sooner we're shot or locked up the better."

"You won't think so when it comes, old man," I said. "Don't bother your head—it ain't the best part of you—about things that can't be helped. We're not the only horses that can't be kept on the course—with a good turn of speed too."

"'They want shooting like the dingoes,' as Aileen said. They're never no good, except to ruin those that back 'em and disgrace their owners and the stable they come out of. That's our sort, all to pieces. Well, we'd better come in. Gracey 'll think we're afraid to face her."

When we went away last Grace Storefield was a little over seventeen, so now she was nineteen all out, and a fine girl she'd grown. Though I never used to think her a beauty, now I almost began to think she must be. She wasn't tall, and Aileen looked slight alongside of her; but she was wonderful fair and fresh coloured for an Australian girl, with a lot of soft brown hair and a pair of clear blue eyes that always looked kindly and honestly into everybody's face. Every look of her seemed to wish to do you good and make you think that nothing that wasn't square and right and honest and true could live in the same place with her.

She held out both hands to me and said—

"Well, Dick, so you're back again. You must have

to the end of the world, and Jim, too. I'm very to see you both."

he looked into my face with that pleased look that ne in mind of her when she was a little child and to come toddling up to me, staring and smiling all her face the moment she saw me. Now she was a n woman, and a sweet-looking one too. I couldn't er up and kiss her as I used to do, but I felt as if uld like to do it all the same. She was the only ure in the whole world, I think, that liked me better Jim. I'd been trying to drive all thoughts of her out y heart, seeing the tangle I'd got into in more ways one; but now the old feeling which had been a of me ever since I'd grown up came rushing back ger than ever. I was surprised at myself, and looked r I daresay.

Then Aileen laughed, and Jim comes to the rescue says —

'Dick doesn't remember you, Gracey. You've grown a swell, too. You can't be the little girl we used rry on our backs."

'Dick remembers very well," she says, and her very was ever so much fuller and softer, "don't you, ?" and she looked into my face as innocent as a . "I don't think he could pull me out of the water carry me up to the cottage now."

'You tumble in and we'll try," says Jim; "first man ep you for good—eh, Gracey? It's fine hot weather, Aileen shall see fair play."

'You're just as saucy as ever, Jim," says she, blush- and smiling. "I see George coming, so I must go fetch in dinner. Aileen's going to help me instead

of mother. You must tell us all about your travels when we sit down."

When George came in he began to talk to make up for lost time, and told us where he had been—a long way out in some new back country, just taken up with sheep. He had got a first-rate paying price for his carriage out, and had brought back and delivered a full load of wool.

"I intend to do it every year for a bit," he said. "I can breed and feed a good stamp of draught horse here. I pay drivers for three waggons and drive the fourth myself. It pays first-rate so far, and we had very fair feed all the way there and back."

"Suppose you get a dry season," I said, "how will that be?"

"We shall have to carry forage, of course; but then carriage will be higher, and it will come to the same thing. I don't like being so long away from home; but it pays first-rate, and I think I see a way to its paying better still."

"So you've ridden over to show them the way, Aileen," he said, as the girls came in; "very good of you it was. I was afraid you'd forgotten the way."

"I never forget the way to a friend's place, George," she said, "and you've been our best friend while these naughty boys have left mother and me so long by ourselves. But you've been away yourself."

"Only four months," he said; "and after a few more trips I shan't want to go away any more."

"That will be a good day for all of us," she said. "You know, Gracey, we can't do without George, can we? I felt quite deserted, I can tell you."

"*He* wouldn't have gone away at all if you'd held

up your little finger, you know that, you hard-hearted girl," said Grace, trying to frown. "It's all your fault."

"Oh! I couldn't interfere with Mr. Storefield's business," said Aileen, looking very grave. "What kind of a country was it you were out in?"

"Not a bad place for sheep and cattle and blacks," said poor George, looking rather glum; "and not a bad country to make money or do anything but live in, but that hot and dry and full of flies and mosquitoes that I'd sooner live on a pound a week down here than take a good station as a present there. That is, if I was contented," he went on to say, with a sort of a groan.

There never was a greater mistake in the world, I believe, than for a man to let a woman know how much he cares for her. It's right enough if she's made up her mind to take him, no odds what happens. But if there's any half-and-half feeling in her mind about him, and she's uncertain and doubtful whether she likes him well enough, all this down-on-your-knees business works against you, more than your worst enemy could do. I didn't know so much about it then. I've found it out since, worse luck. And I really believe if George had had the savey to crack himself up a little, and say he'd met a nice girl or two in the back country and hid his hand, Aileen would have made it up with him that very Christmas, and been a happy woman all her life.

When old Mrs. Storefield came in she put us through our facings pretty brisk—where we'd been, what we'd done? What took us to Melbourne,—how we liked it? What kind of people they were? and so on. We had to tell her a good lot, part of it truth, of course, but pretty mixed. It made rather a good yarn, and I could see Grace was *listening with* her heart as well as her ears.

Jim said generally we met some very nice people in l
bourne named Jackson, and they were very kind to u

"Were there any daughters in the family, Ji
asked Grace.

"Oh! yes, three."

"Were they good looking?"

"No, rather homely, particularly the youngest."

"What did they do?"

"Oh! their mother kept a boarding-house. We sta
there."

I don't think I ever knew Jim do so much lying
fore; but after he'd begun he had to stick to it.
told me afterwards he nearly broke down about the t
daughters; but was rather proud of making the youn
the ugliest.

"I can see Gracey's as fond of you as ever she
Dick," says he; "that's why she made me tell all t
crammers. It's an awful pity we can't all square it,
get spliced this Christmas. Aileen would take Geor
she wasn't a fool, as most women are. I'd like to b
Jeanie up here, and join George in the carrying busi
It's going to be a big thing, I can see. You might m
Gracey, and look after both places while we were aw

"And how about Kate?"

"The devil take her! and then he'd have a bar
I wish you'd never dropped across her, and that
wasn't Jeanie's sister," blurts out Jim. "She'll bring
luck among us before she's done, I feel, as sure as w
standing here."

"It's all a toss up—like our lives; married or lag
bushwork or roadwork (in irons), free or bond. We c
tell how it will be with us this day year."

"I've half a mind to shoot myself," says Jim, "a

end it all. I would, too, only for mother and Aileen. What's the use of life that isn't life, but fear and misery, from one day's end to another, and we only just grown up? It's d—d hard that a chap's brains don't grow along with his legs and arms."

We didn't ride home till quite the evening. Grace would have us stay for tea; it was a pretty hot day, so there was no use riding in the sun. George saddled his horse, and he and Grace rode part of the way home with us. He'd got regular sunburnt like us, and, as he could ride a bit, like most natives, he looked better outside of a horse than on his own legs, being rather thick-set and shortish; but his heart was in the right place, like his sister's, and his head was screwed on right, too. I think more of old George now than I ever did before, and wish I'd had the sense to value his independent straight-ahead nature, and the track it led him, as he deserved.

Jim and I rode in front, with Gracey between us. She had on a neat habit and a better hat and gloves than Aileen, but nothing could ever give her the seat and hand and light, easy, graceful way with her in the saddle that our girl had. All the same she could ride and drive too, and as we rode side by side in the twilight, talking about the places I'd been to, and she wanting to know everything (Jim drew off a bit when the road got narrow), I felt what a fool I'd been to let things slide, and would have given my right hand to have been able to put them as they were three short years before.

At last we got to the Gap; it was the shortest halt from their home. George shook hands with Aileen, and turned back.

"We'll come and see you next—" he said.

"Christmas Eve!" said Aileen.

"Christmas Eve let it be," says George.

"All right," I said, holding Grace's hand for a bit. And so we parted—for how long, do you think?

CHAPTER XVI.

WHEN we got home it was pretty late, and the air was beginning to cool after the hot day. There was a low moon, and everything showed out clear, so that you could see the smallest branches of the trees on Nulla Mountain, where it stood like a dark cloud-bank against the western sky. There wasn't the smallest breeze. The air was that still and quiet you could have heard anything stir in the grass, or almost a 'possum digging his claws into the smooth bark of the white gum trees. The curlews set up a cry from time to time; but they didn't sound so queer and shrill as they mostly do at night. I don't know how it was, but everything seemed quiet and pleasant and homelike, as if a chap might live a hundred years, if it was all like this, and keep growing better and happier every day. I remember all this so particular because it was the only time I'd felt like it for years, and I never had the same feeling afterwards—nor likely to.

"Oh! what a happy day I've had," Aileen said, on a sudden. Jim and I and her had been riding a long spell without speaking. "I don't know when I've enjoyed myself so much; I've got quite out of the way of being happy lately, and hardly know the taste of it. How lovely it would be if you and Jim could always stay at home like this, and we could do our work happy and comfortable together, without separating, and all this deadly fear

of something terrible happening, that's never out of my mind. Oh! Dick, won't you promise me to stop quiet and work steady at home, if you—if you and Jim haven't anything brought against you?"

She bent forward and looked into my face as she said this. I could see her eyes shine, and every word she said seemed to come straight from her heart. How sad and pitiful she looked, and we felt for a moment just as we did when we were boys, and she used to come and persuade us to go on with our work and not grieve mother, and run the risk of a licking from father when he came home.

Her mare, Lowan, was close alongside of my horse, stepping along at her fast tearing walk, throwing up her head and snorting every now and then, but Aileen sat in her saddle better than some people can sit in a chair; she held the rein and whip together and kept her hand on mine till I spoke.

"We'll do all we can, Aileen dear, for you and poor mother, won't we, Jim?" I felt soft and down-hearted then, if ever I did. "But it's too late—too late! You'll see us now and then; but we can't stop at home quiet, nor work about here all the time as we used to do. That day's gone. Jim knows it as well as me. There's no help for it now. We'll have to do like the rest—enjoy ourselves a bit while we can, and stand up to our fight when the trouble comes."

She took her hand away, and rode on with her rein loose and her head down. I could see the tears falling down her face, but after a bit she put herself to rights, and we rode quietly up to the door. Mother was working away in her chair, and father walking up and down before the door *smoking*.

When we were letting go the horses, father cc and says—

"I've got a bit of news for you, boys; Starligh took, and the darkie with him."

"Where?" I said. Somehow I felt struck a heap by hearing this. I'd got out of the way of t they'd drop on him. As for Jim, he heard it enough, but he went on whistling and patting the neck, teasing her like, because she was so uneasy her head-stall off and run after the others.

"Why, in New Zealand, to be sure. The blam stuck there all this time, just because he found comfortably situated among people as he liked. I how he'll fancy Berrima after it all? Sarves hi right."

"But how did you come to hear about it?" W father couldn't read nor write.

"I have a chap as is paid to read the papers and to put me on when there's anything in 'em as to know. He's bin over here to-day and give office. Here's the paper he left."

Father pulls out a crumpled-up dirty-lookin' newspaper. It wasn't much to look at; but the enough to keep us in readin', and thinkin', too good while, as soon as we made it out. In pre letters, too. "Important capture by Detective Sti of the New South Wales Police"—that was atop page, then comes this:—"Our readers may remem description given in this journal, some months si a cattle robbery on the largest scale, when upwar thousand head were stolen from one of Mr. Hoo tions, driven to Adelaide, and then sold, by a p *men* whose names have not as yet transpired. It

factory to find that the leader of the gang, who is well-known to the police by the assumed name of 'Starlight,' with a half-caste lad recognized as an accomplice, has been arrested by this active officer. It appears that, from information received, Detective Stillbrook went to New Zealand, and, after several months' patient search, took his passage in the boat which left that colony, in order to meet the mail steamer, outward bound, for San Francisco. As the passengers were landing he arrested a gentleman-like and well-dressed personage, who, with his servant, was about to proceed to Menzies' Hotel. Considerable surprise was manifested by the other passengers, with whom the prisoner had become universally popular. He indignantly denied all knowledge of the charge; but we have reason to believe that there will be no difficulty as to identification. A large sum of money in gold and notes was found upon him. Other arrests are likely to follow." This looked bad; for a bit we didn't know what to think. While Jim and I was makin' it all out, with the help of a bit of candle we smuggled out—we dursn't take it inside—father was smokin' his pipe—in the old fashion—and saying nothing. When we'd done he put up his pipe in his pouch and begins to talk.

"It's come just as I said, and knowed it would, through Starlight's cussed flashness and carryin's on in fine company. If he'd cleared out and made for the Islands as I warned him to do, and he settled to, or as good, afore he left us that day at the camp, he'd been safe in some o' them 'Merikin places he was always gassin' about, and all this wouldn't a' happened."

"He couldn't help that," says Jim; "he thought they'd never know him from any other swell in Canterbury or wherever he *was*. *He's* been took in like many another

man. What I look at is this: he won't squeak. How are they to find out that we had any hand in it?"

"That's what I'm dubersome about," says father, lightin' his pipe again. "Nobody down there got much of a look at me, and I let my beard grow on the road and shaved clean soon's I got back, same as I always do. Now the thing is, does anyone know that you boys was in the fakement?"

"Nobody's likely to know but him and Warrigal. The knockabouts and those other three chaps won't come it on us for their own sakes. We may as well stop here till Christmas is over and then make down to the Barwon, or somewhere thereabouts. We could take a long job at droving till the derry's off a bit."

"If you'll be said by me," the old man growls out, "you'll make tracks for the Hollow afore daylight and keep dark till we hear how the play goes. I know Starlight's as close as a spring-lock; but that chap Warrigal don't cotton to either of you, and he's likely to give you away if he's pinched himself—that's my notion of him."

"Starlight 'll keep him from doing that," Jim says; "the boy'll do nothing his master don't agree to, and he'd break his neck if he found him out in any dog's trick like that."

"Starlight and he ain't in the same cell, you take your oath. I don't trust no man except him. I'll be off now, and if you'll take a fool's advice, though he is your father, you'll go too; we can be there by daylight."

Jim and I looked at each other.

"We promised to stay Chris'mas with mother and Aileen," says he, "and if all the devils in hell tried to stop us, I wouldn't break my word. But we'll come to *the Hollow* on Boxing Day, won't we, Dick?"

"All right! It's only two or three days. The day ıfter to-morrow's Chris'mas Eve. We'll chance that, as t's gone so far."

"Take your own way," growls father. "Fetch me my ıaddle. The old mare's close by the yard."

Jim fetches the saddle and bridle, and Crib comes ıfter him, out of the verandah, where he had been lying. Bless you! he knew something was up. Just like a Chris-ıian he was, and nothing never happened that dad was n as he wasn't down to.

"May as well stop till morning, dad," says Jim, as we walked up to the yard.

"Not another minute," says the old man, and he whips the bridle out of Jim's hand and walks over to the old mare. She lifts up her head from the dry grass and stands as steady as a rock.

"Good-bye," he says, and he shook hands with both of us; "if I don't see you again I'll send you word if I hear anything fresh."

In another minute we heard the old mare's hoofs proceeding away among the rocks up the gully, and gradually getting fainter in the distance.

Then we went in. Mother and Aileen had been in bed an hour ago, and all the better for them. Next morning we told mother and Aileen that father had gone. They didn't say much. They were used to his ways. They never expected him till they saw him, and had got out of the fashion of asking why he did this or that. He had reasons of his own, which he never told them, for going or coming, and they'd left off troubling their heads about it. Mother was always in dread while he was there, and they were far easier in their minds when he was away off the place.

As for us, we had made up our minds to enjoy ourselves while we could, and we had come to his way of thinking, that most likely nothing was known of our being in the cattle affair that Starlight and the boy had been arrested for. We knew nothing would drag it out of Starlight about his pals in this or any other job. Now they'd got him, it would content them for a bit, and maybe take off their attention from us and the others that were in it.

There were two days to Christmas. Next day George and his sister would be over, and we all looked forward to that for a good reminder of old times. We were going to have a merry Christmas at home for once in a way. After that we would clear out and get away to some of the far out stations, where chaps like ourselves always made to when they wanted to keep dark. We might have the luck of other men that we had known of, and never be traced till the whole thing had died out and been half-forgotten. Though we didn't say much to each other we had pretty well made up our minds to go straight from this out. We might take up a bit of back country, and put stock on it with some of the money we had left. Lots of men had begun that way that had things against them as bad as us, and had kept steady, and worked through in course of time. Why shouldn't we as well as others? We wanted to see what the papers said of us, so we rode over to a little post town we knew of and got a copy of the *Evening Times*. There it all was in full:—

"CATTLE-LIFTING EXTRAORDINARY.

"We have heard from time to time of cattle being stolen in lots of reasonable size, say from ten to one *hundred*, or even as high as two hundred head at the

outside. But we never expected to have to record the erecting of a substantial stockyard and the carrying off and disposing of a whole herd, estimated at a thousand or eleven hundred head, chiefly the property of one proprietor. Yet this has been done in New South Wales, and done, we regret to say, cleverly and successfully. It has just transpired, beyond all possibility of mistake, that Mr. Hood's Outer Back Momberah run has suffered to that extent in the past winter. The stolen herd was driven to Adelaide, and there sold openly. The money was received by the robbers, who were permitted to decamp at their leisure.

"When we mention the name of the notorious 'Starlight,' no one will be surprised that the deed was planned, carried out, and executed with consummate address and completeness. It seems matter of regret that we cannot persuade this illustrious depredator to take the command of our police force, that body of life-assurers and property-protectors which has proved so singularly ineffective as a preventive service in the present case. On the well-known proverbial principle we might hope for the best results under Mr. Starlight's intelligent supervision. We must not withhold our approval as to one item of success which the force has scored. Starlight himself and a half-caste henchman have been cleverly captured by Detective Stillbrook, just as the former, who has been ruffling it among the 'aristocratic' settlers of Christchurch, was about to sail for Honolulu. The names of his other accomplices, six in number, it is said, have not as yet transpired."

This last part gave us confidence, but all the same we kept everything ready for a bolt in case of need. We got up our horses every evening and kept them in

the yard all night. The feed was good by the creek now—a little dried up but plenty of bite, and better for horses that had been ridden far and fast than if it was green. We had enough of last year's hay to give them a feed at night, and that was all they wanted. They were two pretty good ones and not slow either. We took care of that when we bought them. Nobody ever saw us on bad ones since we were boys, and we had broken them in to stand and be caught day or night, and to let us jump on and off at a moment's notice.

All that day, being awful hot and close, we stayed in the house and yarned away with mother and Aileen till they thought—poor souls—that we had turned over a new leaf and were going to stay at home and be good boys for the future. When a man sees how little it takes to make women happy—them that's good and never thinks of anything but doing their best for everybody belonging to 'em—it's wonderful how men ever make up their minds to go wrong and bring all that loves them to shame and grief. When they've got nobody but themselves to think of it don't so much matter as I know of; but to keep on breaking the hearts of those as never did you anything but good, and wouldn't if they lived for a hundred years, is cowardly and unmanly any way you look at it. And yet we'd done very little else ourselves these years and years.

We all sat up till nigh on to midnight with our hands in one another's—Jim down at mother's feet; Aileen and I close beside them on the old seat in the verandah that father made such a time ago. At last mother gets up, and they both started for bed. Aileen seemed as if she couldn't tear herself away. Twice she came back, then *she kissed* us both, and the tears came into her eyes.

"I feel too happy," she said; "I never thought I should feel like this again. God bless you both, and keep us all from harm." "Amen," said mother from the next room. We turned out early, and had a bathe in the creek before we went up to the yard to let out the horses. There wasn't a cloud in the sky; it was safe to be a roasting hot day, but it was cool then. The little waterhole where we learned to swim when we were boys was deep on one side and had a rocky ledge to jump off. The birds just began to give out a note or two; the sun was rising clear and bright, and we could see the dark top of Nulla Mountain getting a sort of rose colour against the sky.

"George and Gracey 'll be over soon after breakfast," I said; "we must have everything look ship-shape as well as we can before they turn up."

"The horses may as well go down to the flat," Jim says; "we can catch them easy enough in time to ride back part of the way with them. I'll run up Lowan, and give her a bit of hay in the calf-pen."

We went over to the yard, and Jim let down the rails and walked in. I stopped outside. Jim had his horse by the mane, and was patting his neck as mine came out, when three police troopers rose up from behind the bushes, and covering us with their rifles called out, "Stand, in the Queen's name!"

Jim made one spring on to his horse's back, drove his heels into his flank, and was out through the gate and half-way down the hill before you could wink.

Just as Jim cleared the gate a tall man rose up close behind me and took a cool pot at him with a revolver. I saw Jim's hat fly off, and another bullet grazed his horse's hip. I saw the hair fly, and the horse make a

plunge that would have unseated most men with no saddle between their legs. But Jim sat close and steady and only threw up his arm and gave a shout as the old horse tore down the hill a few miles an hour faster.

"D—n those cartridges," said the tall trooper; "they always put too much powder in them for close shooting. Now, Dick Marston!" he went on, putting his revolver to my head, "I'd rather not blow your brains out before your people, but if you don't put up your hands by—— I'll shoot you where you stand." I had been staring after Jim all the time; I believe I had never thought of myself till he was safe away.

"Get your horses, you d—d fools," he shouts out to the men, "and see if you can follow up that madman. He's most likely knocked off against a tree by this time."

There was nothing else for it but to do it and be handcuffed. As the steel locks snapped I saw mother standing below wringing her hands, and Aileen trying to get her into the house.

"Better come down and get your coat on, Dick," said the senior constable. "We want to search the place, too. By Jove! we shall get pepper from Sir Ferdinand when we go in. I thought we had you both as safe as chickens in a coop. Who would have thought of Jim givin' us the slip, on a barebacked horse, without so much as a halter? I'm devilish sorry for your family; but if nothing less than a thousand head of cattle will satisfy people, they must expect trouble to come of it."

"What are you talking about?" I said. "You've got the wrong story and the wrong men."

"All right; we'll see about that. I don't know whether you want any breakfast, but I should like a cup of tea. It's deuced slow work watching all night, though it isn't

cold. We've got to be in Bargo barracks to-night, so there's no time to lose."

It was all over now—the worst *had* come. What fools we had been not to take the old man's advice, and clear out when he did. He was safe in the Hollow, and would chuckle to himself—and be sorry, too—when he heard of my being taken, and perhaps Jim. The odds were he might be smashed against a tree, perhaps killed, at the pace he was going on a horse he could not guide.

They searched the house, but the money they didn't get. Jim and I had taken care of that, in case of accidents. Mother sat rocking herself backwards and forwards, every now and then crying out in a pitiful way, like the women in her country do, I've heard tell, when some one of their people is dead; "keening," I think they call it. Well, Jim and I were as good as dead. If the troopers had shot the pair of us there and then, same as bushmen told us the black police did their prisoners when they gave 'em any trouble, it would have been better for everybody. However, people don't die all at once when they go to the bad, and take to stealing or drinking, or any of the devil's favourite traps. Pity they don't, and have done with it once and for all.

I know I thought so when I was forced to stand there with my hands chained together for the first time in my life (though I'd worked for it, I know that); and to see Aileen walking about laying the cloth for breakfast like a dead woman, and know what was in her mind.

The troopers were civil enough, and Goring, the senior constable, tried to comfort them as much as he could. He knew it was no fault of theirs; and though he said he meant to have Jim if mortal men and horses could do it he thought he had a fair chance of getting

away. "He's sure to be caught in the long run, though," he went on to say. "There's a warrant out for him, and a description in every *Police Gazette* in the colonies. My advice to him would be to come back and give himself up. It's not a hanging matter, and as it's the first time you've been fitted, Dick, the Judge, as like as not, will let you off with a light sentence."

So they talked away until they had finished their breakfast. I couldn't touch a mouthful for the life of me, and as soon as it was all over they ran up my horse and put the saddle on. But I wasn't to ride him. No fear! Goring put me on an old screw of a troop horse, with one leg like a gate-post. I was helped up and my legs tied under his belly. Then one of the men took the bridle and led me away. Goring rode in front and the other men behind.

As we rose the hill above the place I looked back and saw mother drop down on the ground in a kind of fit, while Aileen bent over her and seemed to be loosening her dress. Just at that moment George Storefield and his sister rode up to the door. George jumped off and rushed over to Aileen and mother. I knew Gracey had seen me, for she sat on her horse as if she had been turned to stone, and let her reins drop on his neck. Strange things have happened to me since, but I shall never forget that to the last day of my miserable life.

CHAPTER XVII.

I WASN'T in the humour for talking, but sometimes anything's better than one's own thoughts. Goring threw in a word from time to time. He'd only lately come

into our district, and was sure to be promoted, everybody said. Like Starlight himself, he'd seen better days at home in England; but when he got pinched he'd taken the right turn and not the wrong one, which makes all the difference. He was earning his bread honest, anyway, and he was a chap as liked the fun and dash of a mounted policeman's life. As for the risk—and there is some danger, more than people thinks, now and then—he liked that the best of it. He was put out at losing Jim; but he believed he couldn't escape, and told me so in a friendly way. "He's inside a circle and he can't get away, you mark my words," he said, two or three times. "We have every police-station warned by wire, within a hundred miles of here, three days ago. There's not a man in the colony sharper looked after than Master Jim is this minute."

"Then you only heard about us three days ago?" I said.

"That's as it may be," he answered, biting his lip. "Anyhow, there isn't a shepherd's hut within miles that he can get to without our knowing it. The country's rough, but there's word gone for a black tracker to go down. You'll see him in Bargo before the week's out."

I had a good guess where Jim would make for, and he knew enough to hide his tracks for the last few miles if there was a whole tribe of trackers after him.

That night we rode into Bargo. A long day too we'd had—we were all tired enough when we got in. I was locked up, of course, and as soon as we were in the cell Goring said, "Listen to me," and put on his official face—devilish stern and hard-looking he was then, in spite of all the talking and nonsense we'd had coming along.

"Richard Marston, I charge you with unlawfully taking, stealing, and carrying away, in compay with others, one thousand head of mixed cattle, more or less, the property of one Walter Hood, of Outer Back, Momberah, in or about the month of June last."

"All right; why don't you make it a few more while you're about it?"

"That'll do," he said, nodding his head, "you decline to say anything. Well, I can't exactly wish you a merry Christmas—fancy this being Christmas Eve, by Jove!—but you'll be cool enough this deuced hot weather till the sessions in February, which is more than some of us can say. Good-night." He went out and locked the door. I sat down on my blanket on the floor and hid my head in my hands. I wonder it didn't burst with what I felt then. Strange that I shouldn't have felt half as bad when the Judge, the other day, sentenced me to be a dead man in a couple of months. But I was young then.

* * * * *

Christmas Day! Christmas Day! So this is how I was to spend it after all, I thought, as I woke up at dawn, and saw the grey light just beginning to get through the bars of the window of the cell.

Here was I locked up, caged, ironed, disgraced, a felon and an outcast for the rest of my life. Jim, flying for his life, hiding from every honest man, every policeman in the country looking after him, and authorized to catch him or shoot him down like a sheep-killing dog. Father living in the Hollow, like a blackfellow in a cave, afraid to spend the blessed Christmas with his wife and daughter, like the poorest man in the land could do if *he was only* honest. Mother half dead with grief, and

Aileen ashamed to speak to the man that loved and respected her from her childhood. Gracey Storefield not daring to think of me or say my name, after seeing me carried off a prisoner before her eyes. Here was a load of misery and disgrace heaped up together, to be borne by the whole family, now and for the time to come—by the innocent as well as the guilty. And for what? Because we had been too idle and careless to work regularly and save our money, though well able to do it, like honest men. Because, little by little, we had let bad dishonest ways and flash manners grow upon us, all running up an account that had to be paid some day.

And now the day of reckoning had come—sharp and sudden with a vengeance! Well, what call had we to look for anything else? We had been working for it; now we had got it, and had to bear it. Not for want of warning, neither. What had mother and Aileen been saying ever since we could remember? Warning upon warning. Now the end had come just as they said. Of course I knew in a general way that I couldn't be punished or be done anything to right off. I knew law enough for that. The next thing would be that I should have to be brought up before the magistrates and committed for trial as soon as they could get any evidence.

After breakfast, flour and water or hominy, I forget which, the warder told me that there wasn't much chance of my being brought up before Christmas was over. The police magistrate was away on a month's leave and the other magistrates would not be likely to attend before the end of the week, anyway. So I must make myself comfortable where I was. Comfortable!

"Had they caught Jim?"

"Well, not that he'd heard of; but Goring said it was impossible for him to get away. At twelve he'd bring me some dinner."

I was pretty certain they wouldn't catch Jim, in spite of Goring being so cocksure about it. If he wasn't knocked off the first mile or so, he'd find ways of stopping or steadying his horse, and facing him up to where we had gone to join father at the tableland of the Nulla Mountain. Once he got near there he could let go his horse. They'd be following his track, while he made the best of his way on foot to the path that led to the Hollow. If he had five miles start of them there, as was most likely, all the blacks in the country would never track where he got to. He and father could live there for a month or so, and take it easy until they could slip out and do a bit of father's old trade. That was about what I expected Jim to do, and as it turned out I was as nearly right as could be. They ran his track for ten miles. Then they followed his horse-tracks till late the second day, and found that the horse had slued round and was making for home again with nobody on him. Jim was nowhere to be seen, and they'd lost all that time, never expecting that he was going to dismount and leave the horse to go his own way.

They searched Nulla Mountain from top to bottom; but some of the smartest men of the old Mounted Police and the best of the stock-men in the old days—men not easy to beat—had tried the same country many years before, and never found the path to the Hollow. So it wasn't likely anyone else would. They had to come back and own that they were beat, which put Goring in a rage and made the inspector, Sir Ferdinand Morringer, blow *them all* up for a lot of duffers and old women. Alto-

gether they had a bad time of it, not that it made any difference to me.

After the holidays a magistrate was fished up somehow, and I was brought before him and the apprehending constable's evidence taken. Then I was remanded to the Bench at Nomah, where Mr. Hood and some of the other witnesses were to appear. So away we started for another journey. Goring and a trooper went with me, and all sorts of care was taken that I didn't give them the slip on the road. Goring used to put one of my handcuffs on his own wrist at night, so there wasn't much chance of moving without waking him. I had an old horse to ride that couldn't go much faster than I could run, for fear of accident. It was even betting that he'd fall and kill me on the road. If I'd had a laugh in me, I should have had a joke against the Police Department for not keeping safer horses for their prisoners to ride. They keep them till they haven't a leg to stand upon, and long after they can't go a hundred yards without trying to walk on their heads they're thought good enough to carry packs and prisoners.

"Some day," Goring said, "one of those old screws will be the death of a prisoner before he's committed for trial, and then there'll be a row over it, I suppose."

We hadn't a bad journey of it on the whole. The troopers were civil enough, and gave me a glass of grog now and then when they had one themselves. They'd done their duty in catching me, and that was all they thought about. What came afterwards wasn't their lookout. I've no call to have any bad feeling against the police, and I don't think most men of my sort have. They'd got their work to do, like other people, and as long as they do what they're paid for, and don't go out

of their way to harass men for spite, we don't bear them any malice. If one's hit in fair fight it's the fortune of war. What our side don't like is men going in for police duty that's not in their line. That's interfering, according to our notions, and if they fall into a trap or are met with when they don't expect it they get it pretty hot. They've only themselves to thank for it.

Goring, I could see by his ways, had been a swell, something like Starlight. A good many young fellows that don't drop into fortunes when they come out here take to the police in Australia, and very good men they make. They like the half-soldiering kind of life, and if they stick steady at their work, and show pluck and gumption, they mostly get promoted. Goring was a real smart, dashing chap, a good rider for an Englishman; that is, he could set most horses, and hold his own with us natives anywhere but through scrub and mountain country. No man can ride there, I don't care who he is, the same as we can, unless he's been at it all his life. There we have the pull—not that it is so much after all. But give a native a good horse and thick country, and he'll lose any man living that's tackled the work after he's grown up.

By-and-by we got to Nomah, a regular hot hole of a place, with a log lock-up. I was stuck in, of course, and had leg-irons put on for fear I should get out, as another fellow had done a few weeks back. Starlight and Warrigal hadn't reached yet; they had farther to come. The trial couldn't come till the Quarter Sessions. January, and February too, passed over, and all this time I was mewed up in a bit of a place enough to stifle a man in the burning weather we had.

I heard afterwards that they wanted to bring some of

the cattle over, so as Mr. Hood could swear to 'em being his property. But he said he could only swear to its being his brand; that he most likely had never set eyes on them in his life, and couldn't swear on his own knowledge that they hadn't been sold, like lots of others, by his manager. So this looked like a hitch, as juries won't bring a man in guilty of cattle-stealing unless there's clear swearing that the animals he sold were the property of the prosecutor, and known by him to be such.

Mr. Hood had to go all the way to Adelaide himself, and they told me we might likely have got out of it all, only for the imported bull. When he saw him he said he could swear to him point blank, brand or no brand. He'd no brand on him, of course, when he left England; but Hood happened to be in Sydney when he came out, and at the station when he came up. He was stabled for the first six months, so he used to go and look him over every day, and tell visitors what a pot of money he'd cost, till he knew every hair in his tail, as the saying is. As soon as he seen him in Adelaide he said he could swear to him as positive as he could to his favourite riding horse. So he was brought over in a steamer from Adelaide, and then drove all the way up to Nomah. I wished he'd broken his neck before we ever saw him.

Next thing I saw was Starlight being brought in, handcuffed, between two troopers, and looking as if he'd ridden a long way. He was just as easy-going and devil-may-care as ever. He said to one of the troopers—

"Here we are at last, and I'm deuced glad of it. It's perfectly monstrous you fellows haven't better horses. You ought to make me remount agent, and I'd show you the sort of horses that ought to be bought for police service. Let me have a glass of beer, that's a good fel-

low, before I'm locked up. I suppose there's no worth speaking of inside."

The constable laughed, and had one brought to

"It will be some time before you get another, cap Here's a long one for you; make the most of it."

Where, in the devil's name, is that Warrigal thought to myself. Has he given them the slip? had, as it turned out. He had slipped the handcuffs his slight wrists and small hands, bided his time, then dashed into a scrub. There he was at home. T rode and rode, but Warrigal was gone like a rock laby. It was a good while before he was as near gaol again.

All this time I'd been wondering how it was came to drop on our names so pat, and to find out Jim and I had a share in the Momberah cattle rac All they could have known was that we left the bac Boree at a certain day; and that was nothing, seeing for all they knew we might have gone away to new c try or anywhere. The more I looked at it the mo felt sure that someone had given to the police infor tion about us—somebody who was in it and knew about everything. It wasn't Starlight. We could l depended our life on him. It might have been on the other chaps, but I couldn't think of anyone, ex Warrigal. He would do anything in the world to s me and Jim, I knew; but then he couldn't hurt us w out drawing the net tighter round Starlight. Sooner t hurt a hair of his head he'd have put his hand into fire and kept it there. I knew that from things I'd s him do.

Starlight and I hadn't much chance of a talk, but *managed* to get news from each other, a bit at a ti

hat can always be managed. We were to be defended, .nd a lawyer fetched all the way from Sydney to fight ›ur case for us. The money was there. Father managed he other part of it through people he had that did every :ind of work for him; so when the judge came up we hould have a show for it.

The weary long summer days—every one of them .bout twenty hours long—came to an end somehow or ›ther. It was so hot and close and I was that miserable had two minds to knock my brains out and finish the vhole thing. I couldn't settle to read, as I did after-vards. I was always wishing and wondering when I'd ıear some news from home, and none ever came. Nomah vas a bit of a place where hardly anybody did anything ›ut idle and drink, and spend money when they had it. Vhen they had none they went away. There wasn't ven a place to take exercise in, and the leg-irons I ›ore night and day began to eat into my flesh. I wasn't .sed to them in those days. I could feel them in my eart, too. Last of all I got ill, and for awhile was so veak and low they thought I was going to get out of the :ial altogether.

At last we heard that the judge and all his lot were n the road, and would be up in a few days. We were lmost as glad when the news came as if we were sure of eing let off. One day they did come, and all the little ›wn was turned upside down. The judge stopped at ne hotel (they told us); the lawyers at another. Then ıe witnesses in ours and other cases came in from all arts, and made a great difference, especially to the ublicans. The jurors were summoned, and had to come, nless they had a fancy for being fined. Most of this I eard from the constables; they seemed to think it was

the only thing that made any difference in their lives. Last of all I heard that Mr. Hood had come, and the imported bull, and some other witnesses.

There were some small cases first, and then we were brought out, Starlight and I, and put in the dock. The court was crammed and crowded; every soul within a hundred miles seemed to have come in; there never were so many people in the little courthouse before. Starlight was quietly dressed, and looked as if he was there by mistake. Anybody would have thought so, the way he lounged and stared about, as if he thought there was something very curious and hard to understand about the whole thing. I was so weak and ill that I couldn't stand up, and after awhile the judge told me to sit down, and Starlight too. Starlight made a most polite bow, and thanked his Honour, as he called him. Then the jury were called up, and our lawyer began his work. He stood alongside of Starlight, and whispered something to him, after which Starlight stood up, and about every second man called out "Challenge;" then that juror had to go down. It took a good while to get our jury all together. Our lawyer seemed very particular about the sort of jury he was satisfied with; and when they did manage to get twelve at last they were not the best-looking men in the court by a very long way.

The trial had to go on, and then the Crown Prosecutor made a speech, in which he talked about the dishonesty which was creeping unchecked over the land, and the atrocious villainy of criminals who took a thousand head of cattle in one lot, and made out the country was sure to go to destruction if we were not convicted. He said that unfortunately they were not in a position to *bring many* of the cattle back that had been taken to

another colony; but one remarkable animal was as good for purposes of evidence as a hundred. Such an animal he would produce, and he would not trespass on the patience of jurors and gentlemen in attendance any longer, but call his first witness.

John Dawson, sworn: Was head stockman and cattle manager at Momberah; knew the back country, and in a general way the cattle running there; was not out much in the winter; the ground was boggy, and the cattle were hardly ever mustered till spring; when he did go, with some other stock-riders, he saw at once that a large number of the Momberah cattle, branded HOD and other brands, were missing; went to Adelaide a few months after; saw a large number of cattle of the HOD brand, which he was told had been sold by the prisoner now before the Court, and known as Starlight, and others, to certain farmers; he could swear that the cattle he saw bore Mr. Hood's brand; could not swear that he recognized them as having been at Momberah in his charge; believed so, but could not swear it; he had seen a short-horn bull outside of the Court this morning; he last saw the said bull at the station of Messrs. Fordham Brothers, near Adelaide; they made a communication to him concerning the bull; he would and could swear to the identity of the animal with the 15th Duke of Cambridge, an imported shorthorn bull, the property of Mr. Hood; had seen him before that at Momberah; knew that Mr. Hood had bought said bull in Sydney, and was at Momberah when he was sent up; could not possibly be mistaken; when he saw the bull at Momberah, nine months since, he had a small brand like H on the shoulder; Mr. Hood put it on in witness's presence; it was a horse-brand, now it resembled J-E; the brand had been "faked"

or cleverly altered; witness could see the original brand quite plain underneath; as far as he knew Mr. Hood never sold or gave anyone authority to take the animal; he had missed him some months since, and always believed he had strayed; knew the bull to be a valuable animal, worth several hundred pounds.

We had one bit of luck in having to be tried in an out-of-the-way place like Nomah. It was a regular outside bush township, and though the distance oughtn't to have much to say to people's honesty, you'll mostly find that these far-out back-of-beyond places have got men and women to match 'em.

Except the squatters and overseers, the other people's mostly a shady lot. Some's run away from places that were too hot to hold 'em. The women ain't the men's wives that they live with, but somebody else's—who's well rid of 'em too if all was known. There's most likely a bit of horse and cattle stealing done on the quiet, and the publicans and storekeepers know who are their best customers, the square people or the cross ones. It ain't so easy to get a regular up and down straight ahead jury in a place of this sort. So Starlight and I knew that our chance was a lot better than if we'd been tried at Bargo or Dutton Forest, or any steady-going places of that sort.

If we'd made up our minds from the first that we were to get into it it wouldn't have been so bad; we'd have known we had to bear it. Now we might get out of it, and what a thing it would be to feel free again, and walk about in the sun without anyone having the right to stop you. Almost, that is—there were other things against us; but there wasn't so much of a chance *of their* turning up. This was the great stake. If we

on we were as good as made. I felt ready to swear I go home and never touch a shilling that didn't come nest again. If we lost it seemed as if everything was much the worse, and blacker than it looked at first, st for this bit of hope and comfort.

After the bull had been sworn to by Mr. Hood and other witness, they brought up some more evidence, they called it, about the other cattle we had sold in delaide. They had fetched some of the farmers up at had been at the sale. They swore straight enough having bought cattle with certain brands from Starlight. ney didn't know, of course, at the time whose they ere, but they could describe the brands fast enough. nere was one fellow that couldn't read nor write, but remembered all the brands, about a dozen, in the pen steers he bought, and described them one by one. ne brand, he said, was like a long-handled shovel. It rned out to be D. TD.—Tom Dawson's, of Mungeree. bout a hundred of his were in the mob. They had awn back for Mungeree, as was nearly all frontage and ld in the winter. He was the worst witness for us of e lot, very near. He'd noticed everything and forgot thing.

"Do you recognize either of the prisoners in the ck?" he was asked.

"Yes; both of 'em," says he. I wish I could have got him. "I see the swell chap first—him as made out was the owner, and gammoned all the Adelaide gentlen so neat. There was a half-caste chap with him as lowed him about everywhere; then there was another n as didn't talk much, but seemed, by letting down prails and what not, to be in it. I heard this Starht, as he calls *hisself* now, say to him, 'You have

everything ready to break camp by ten o'clock, a
be there to-morrow and square up.' I thought he
to pay their wages. I never dropped but what the
his men—his hired servants—as he was going to
or send back."

"Will you swear," our lawyer says, "that the yo
prisoner is the man you saw at Adelaide with the ca

"Yes; I'll swear. I looked at him pretty shar
nothing ain't likely to make me forget him. He
man, and that I'll swear to."

"Were there not other people there with the ca

"Yes; there was an oldish, very quiet, but deter
like man—he had a stunning' dorg with him—
young man something like this gentleman—I mea
prisoner. I didn't see the other young man no
half-caste in Court."

"That's all very well," says our lawyer, very
"but will you swear, sir, that the prisoner Marston
any charge or ownership of the cattle?"

"No, I can't," says the chap. "I see him a dr
'em in the morning, and he seemed to know a
brands, and so on; but he done no more than I've
hired servants do over and over again."

The other witnesses had done, when someone
out, "Herbert Falkland," and Mr. Falkland steps int
Court. He walks in quiet and a little proud; he co
help feeling it, but he didn't show it in his ways
talk, as little as any man I ever saw.

He's asked by the Crown Prosecutor if he's see
bull outside of the Court this day.

"Yes; he has seen him."

"Has he ever seen him before?"

"Never, to his knowledge."

"He doesn't, then, know the name of his former owner?"

"Has heard generally that he belonged to Mr. Hood, of Momberah; but does not know it of his own knowledge."

"Has he ever seen, or does he know either of the prisoners?"

"Knows the younger prisoner, who has been in the habit of working for him in various ways."

"When was prisoner Marston working for him last?"

"He, with his brother James, who rendered his family a service he shall never forget, was working for him, after last shearing, for some months."

"Where were they working?"

"At an out-station at the back of the run."

"When did they leave?"

"About April or May last."

"Was it known to you in what direction they proceeded after leaving your service?"

"I have no personal knowledge; I should think it improper to quote hearsay."

"Had they been settled up with for their former work?"

"No, there was a balance due to them."

"To what amount?"

"About twenty pounds each was owing."

"Did you not think it curious that ordinary labourers should leave so large a sum in your hands?"

"It struck me as unusual, but I did not attach much weight to the circumstance. I thought they would come back and ask for it before the next shearing. I am heartily sorry that they did not do so, and regret still more deeply that two young men worthy of a better fate should have been arraigned on such a charge."

"One moment, Mr. Falkland," says our counsel, as they call them, and a first rate counsellor ours was. If we'd been as innocent as two school-girls he couldn't have done more for us. "Did the prisoner Marston work well and conduct himself properly while in your employ?"

"No man better," says Mr. Falkland, looking over to me with that pitying kind of look in his eyes as made me feel what a fool and rogue I'd been ten times worse than anything else. "No man better; he and his brother were in many respects, according to my overseer's report, the most hard-working and best-conducted labourers in the establishment."

CHAPTER XVIII.

Mr. Runnimall, the auctioneer, swore that the older prisoner placed certain cattle in his hands, to arrive, for sale in the usual way, stating that his name was Mr. Charles Carisforth, and that he had several stations in other colonies. Had no reason for doubting him. Prisoner was then very well dressed, was gentlemanly in his manners, and came to his office with a young gentleman of property whom he knew well. The cattle were sold in the usual way for rather high prices, as the market was good. The proceeds in cash were paid over to the prisoner, whom he now knew by the name of Starlight. He accounted for there being an unusual number of brands by saying publicly at the sale that the station had been used as a depôt for other runs of his, and the remainder lots of store cattle kept there.

He had seen a shorthorn bull outside of the court *this day* branded "J-E" on the shoulder. He identified

him as one of the cattle placed in his hands for sale by the prisoner Starlight. He sold and delivered him according to instructions. He subsequently handed over the proceeds to the said prisoner. He included the purchase money in a cheque given for the bull and other cattle sold on that day. He could swear positively to the bull; he was a remarkable animal. He had not the slightest doubt as to his identity.

"Had he seen the prisoner Marston when the cattle were sold now alleged to belong to Mr. Hood?"

"Yes; he was confident that prisoner was there with some other men whom he (witness) did not particularly remark. He helped to draft the cattle, and to put them in pens on the morning of the sale."

"Was he prepared to swear that prisoner Marston was not a hired servant of prisoner Starlight?"

"No; he could not swear. He had no way of knowing what the relations were between the two. They were both in the robbery; he could see that."

"How could you see that?" said our lawyer. "Have you never seen a paid stockman do all that you saw prisoner Marston do?"

"Well, I have; but somehow I fancy this man was different."

"We have nothing to do with your fancies, sir," says our man, mighty hot, as he turns upon him; "you are here to give evidence as to facts, not as to what you fancy. Have you any other grounds for connecting prisoner Marston with the robbery in question?"

"No, he had not."

"You can *go down, sir*, and I only wish you may

live to experience some of the feelings which fill the breasts of persons who are unjustly convicted."

* * * * * *

This about ended the trial. There was quite enough proved for a moderate dose of transportation. A quiet, oldish-looking man got up now and came forward to the witness-box. I didn't know who he was; but Starlight nodded to him quite pleasant. He had a short, close-trimmed beard, and was one of those nothing-particular-looking old chaps. I'm blessed if I could have told what he was. He might have been a merchant, or a squatter, or a head clerk, or a wine merchant, or a broker, or lived in the town, or lived in the country; any of half-a-dozen trades would suit him. The only thing that was out of the common was his eyes. They had a sort of curious way of looking at you, as if he wondered whether you was speaking true, and yet seein' nothing and tellin' nothing. He regular took in Starlight (he told me afterwards) by always talking about the China Seas; he'd been there, it seems; he'd been everywhere; he'd last come from America; he didn't say he'd gone there to collar a clerk that had run off with two or three thousand pounds, and to be ready to meet him as he stepped ashore.

Anyhow he'd watched Starlight in Canterbury when he was riding and flashing about, and had put such a lot of things together that he took a passage in the same boat with him to Melbourne. Why didn't he arrest him in New Zealand? Because he wasn't sure of his man. It was from something Starlight let out on board ship. He told me himself afterwards that he made sure of his being the man he wanted; so he steps into the witness-box, very quiet and respectable-looking, with his white

waistcoat and silk coat—it was hot enough to fry beefsteaks on the roof of the Courthouse that day—and looks about him. The Crown Prosecutor begins with him as civil as you please.

"My name is Stephen Stillbrook. I am a sergeant of detective police in the service of the Government of New South Wales. From information received, I proceeded to Canterbury, in New Zealand, about the month of September last. I saw there the older prisoner, who was living at a first-class hotel in Christchurch. He was moving in good society, and was apparently possessed of ample means. He frequently gave expensive entertainments, which were attended by the leading inhabitants and high officials of the place. I myself obtained an introduction to him, and partook of his hospitality on several occasions. I attempted to draw him out in conversation about New South Wales; but he was cautious, and gave me to understand that he had been engaged in large squatting transactions in another colony. From his general bearing and from the character of his associates, I came to the belief that he was not the individual named in the warrant, and determined to return to Sydney. I was informed that he had taken his passage to Melbourne in a mail steamer. From something which I one day heard his half-caste servant say, who, being intoxicated, was speaking carelessly, I determined to accompany them to Melbourne. My suspicions were confirmed on the voyage. As we went on shore at the pier at Sandridge I accosted him. I said, 'I arrest you on suspicion of having stolen a herd of cattle, the property of Walter Hood, of Momberah.' Prisoner was very cool and polite, just as any other gentleman would be, and asked me if I did not think I'd made a most ridiculous mistake. The other

passengers began to laugh, as if it was the best joke in the world. Starlight never moved a muscle. I've seen a good many cool hands in my time, but I never met anyone like him. I had given notice to one of the Melbourne police as he came aboard, and he arrested the half-caste, known as Warrigal. I produced a warrant, the one now before the Court, which is signed by a magistrate of the territory of New South Wales."

The witnessing part was all over. It took the best part of the day, and there we were all the time standing up in the dock, with the Court crammed with people staring at us. I don't say that it felt as bad as it might have done nigh home. Most of the Nomah people looked upon fellows stealing cattle or horses, in small lots or big, just like most people look at boys stealing fruit out of an orchard, or as they used to talk of smugglers on the English coast, as I've heard father tell of. Any man might take a turn at that sort of thing, now and then, and not be such a bad chap after all. It was the duty of the police to catch him. If they caught him, well and good, it was so much the worse for him; if they didn't, that was their look-out. It wasn't anybody else's business anyhow. And a man that wasn't caught, or that got turned up at his trial, was about as good as the general run of people; and there was no reason for anyone to look shy at him.

After the witnesses had said all they knew our lawyer got up and made a stunning speech. He made us out such first-rate chaps that it looked as if we ought to get off flying. He blew up the squatters in a general way for taking all the country, and not giving the poor man a chance—for neglecting their immense herds of cattle *and suffering* them to roam all over the country, putting

temptation in the way of poor people, and causing confusion and recklessness of all kinds. Some of these cattle are never seen from the time they are branded till they are mustered, every two or three years apparently. They stray away hundreds of miles—probably a thousand —who is to know? Possibly they are sold. It was admitted by the prosecutor that he had sold 10,000 head of cattle during the last six years, and none had been rebranded to his knowledge. What means had he of knowing whether these cattle that so much was said about had not been legally sold before? It was a most monstrous thing that men like his clients—men who were an honour to the land they lived in—should be dragged up to the very centre of the continent upon a paltry charge like this—a charge which rested upon the flimsiest evidence it had ever been his good fortune to demolish.

With regard to the so-called imported bull the case against his clients was apparently stronger, but he placed no reliance upon the statements of the witnesses, who averred that they knew him so thoroughly that they could not be deceived in him. He distrusted their evidence and believed the jury would distrust it too. The brand was as different as possible from the brand seen to have been on the beast originally. One shorthorn was very like another. He would not undertake to swear positively in any such case, and he implored the jury, as men of the world, as men of experience in all transactions relating to stock (here some of the people in the Court grinned) to dismiss from their minds everything of the nature of prejudice, and looking solely at the miserable, incomplete, unsatisfactory nature of the evidence, to acquit the prisoners.

It sounded all very pleasant after everything before

had been so rough on our feelings, and the jury looked as if they'd more than half made up their minds to let us off.

Then the Judge put on his glasses and began to go all over the evidence, very grave and steady like, and read bits out of the notes which he'd taken very careful all the time. Judges don't have such an easy time of it as some people thinks they have. I've often wondered as they take so much trouble, and works away so patient trying to find out the rights and wrongs of things for people that they never saw before, and won't see again. However, they try to do their best, all as I've ever seen, and they generally get somewhere near the right and justice of things. So the Judge began and read—went over the evidence bit by bit, and laid it all out before the jury, so as they couldn't but see it where it told against us, and, again, where it was a bit in our favour.

As for the main body of the cattle, he made out that there was strong grounds for thinking as we'd taken and sold them at Adelaide, and had the money too. The making of a stockyard at the back of Momberah was not the thing honest men would do. But neither of us prisoners had been seen there. There was no identification of the actual cattle, branded "HOD," alleged to have been stolen, nor could Mr. Hood swear positively that they were his cattle, had never been sold, and were a portion of his herd. It was in the nature of these cases that identification of live stock, roaming over the immense solitudes of the interior, should be difficult, occasionally impossible. Yet he trusted that the jury would give full weight to all the circumstances which went to show a continuous possession of the animals alleged to be stolen. The persons of both prisoners had been po-

sitively sworn to by several witnesses as having been seen at the sale of the cattle referred to. They were both remarkable-looking men, and such as if once seen would be retained in the memory of the beholder.

But the most important piece of evidence (here the Judge stopped and took a pinch of snuff) was that afforded by the shorthorn bull, Fifteenth Duke of Cambridge—he had been informed that was his name. That animal, in the first place, was sworn to most positively by Mr. Hood, and claimed as his property. Other credible witnesses testified also to his identity, and corroborated the evidence of Mr. Hood in all respects; the ownership and identity of the animal are thus established beyond all doubt.

Then there was the auctioneer, Mr. Runnimall, who swore that this animal had been, with other cattle, placed in his hands for sale by the older prisoner. The bull is accordingly sold publicly by him, and in the prisoner's presence. He subsequently receives from the witness the price, about £270, for which the bull was sold. The younger prisoner was there at the same time, and witnessed the sale of the bull and other cattle, giving such assistance as would lead to the conclusion that he was concerned in the transaction.

He did not wish to reflect upon this or any other jury, but he could not help recalling the fact that a jury in that town once committed the unpardonable fault, the crime, he had almost said, of refusing to find a prisoner guilty against whom well confirmed evidence had been brought. It had been his advice to the Minister for Justice, so glaring was the miscarriage of justice to which he referred, that the whole of the jurymen who had sat

upon that trial should be struck off the roll. This was accordingly done.

He, the Judge, was perfectly convinced in his own mind that no impropriety of this sort was likely to be committed by the intelligent, respectable jury whom he saw before him; but it was his duty to warn them that, in his opinion, they could not bring in any verdict but "Guilty" if they respected their oaths. He should leave the case confidently in their hands, again impressing upon them that they could only find one verdict if they believed the evidence.

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The jury all went out. Then another case was called on, and a fresh jury sworn in for to try it. We sat in the dock. The Judge told Starlight he might sit down, and we waited till they came back. I really believe that waiting is the worst part of the whole thing, the bitterest part of the punishment. I've seen men when they were being tried for their lives—haven't I done it, and gone through it myself?—waiting there an hour—two hours, half through the night, not knowing whether they was to be brought in guilty or not. What a hell they must have gone through in that time—doubt and dread, hope and fear, wretchedness and despair, over and over and over again. No wonder some of 'em can't stand it, but keeps twitching and shifting and getting paler and turning faint when the jury comes back, and they think they see one thing or the other written in their faces. I've seen a strong man drop down like a dead body when the Judge opened his mouth to pass sentence on him. I've seen 'em faint, too, when the foreman of the jury said "Not guilty." One chap, he was an innocent up-country fellow, *in for* his first bit of duffing, like we was once, he

covered his face with his hands when he found he was let off, and cried like a child. All sorts and kinds of different ways men takes it. I was in court once when the Judge asked a man who'd just been found guilty if he'd anything to say why he shouldn't pass sentence of death upon him. He'd killed a woman, cut her throat, and a regular right down cruel murder it was (only men 'll kill women and one another, too, for some causes, as long as the world lasts); and he just leaned over the dock rails, as if he'd been going to get three months, and said, cool and quiet, "No, your Honour; not as I know of." He'd made up his mind to it from the first, you see, and that makes all the difference. He knew he hadn't the ghost of a chance to get out of it, and when his time came he faced it. I remember seeing his worst enemy come into the Court, and sit and look at him then just to see how he took it, but he didn't make the least sign. That man couldn't have told whether he seen him or not.

Starlight and I wasn't likely to break down—not much—whatever the jury did or the Judge said. All the same, after an hour had passed, and we still waiting there, it began to be a sickening kind of feeling. The day had been all taken up with the evidence and the rest of the trial; all long, dragging hours of a hot summer's day. The sun had been blazing away all day on the iron roof of the Courthouse and the red dust of the streets, that lay inches deep for a mile all round the town. The flies buzzed all over the Courthouse, and round and round, while the lawyers talked and wrangled with each other; and still the trial went on. Witness after witness was called, and cross-examined and bullied, and confused and contradicted till he was afraid to say

what he knew or what he didn't know. I began to think it must be some kind of performance that would go on for ever and never stop, and the day and it never could end.

At last the sun came shining level with the lower window, and we knew it was getting late. After a while the twilight began to get dimmer and grayer. There isn't much out there when the sun goes down. Then the Judge ordered the lamps to be lighted.

Just at that time the bailiff came forward.

"Your Honour, the jury has agreed." I felt my teeth shut hard; but I made no move or sign. I looked over at Starlight. He yawned. He did, as I'm alive.

"I wish to heaven they'd make more haste," he said, quietly; "his Honour and we are both being done out of our dinners."

I said nothing. I was looking at the foreman's face. I thought I knew the word he was going to say, and that word was "Guilty." Sure enough I didn't hear anything more for a bit. I don't mind owning that. Most men feel that way the first time. There was a sound like rushing waters in my ears, and the Courthouse and the people all swam before my eyes.

The first I heard was Starlight's voice again, just as cool and leisurely as ever. I never heard any difference in it, and I've known him speak in a lot of different situations. If you shut your eyes you couldn't tell from the tone of his voice whether he was fighting for his life or asking you to hand him the salt. When he said the hardest and fiercest thing—and he could be hard and fierce—he didn't raise his voice; he only seemed to speak more distinct like. His eyes were worse than his voice at such times. There weren't many men that liked to look back at him, much less say anything.

Now he said, "That means five years of Berrima, Dick, if not seven. It's cooler than these infernal logs, that's one comfort."

I said nothing. I couldn't joke. My throat was dry, and I felt hot and cold by turns. I thought of the old hut by the creek, and could see mother sitting rocking herself, and crying out loud, and Aileen with a set dull look on her face as if she'd never speak or smile again. I thought of the days, months, years that were to pass under lock and key, with irons and shame and solitude all for company. I wondered if the place where they shut up mad people was like a gaol, and why we were not sent there instead.

I heard part of what the Judge said, but not all—bits here and there. The jury had brought in a most righteous verdict; just what he should have expected from the effect of the evidence upon an intelligent, well-principled Nomah jury. (We heard afterwards that they were six to six, and then agreed to toss up how the verdict was to go.) "The crime of cattle and horse stealing had assumed gigantic proportions. Sheep, as yet, appeared to be safe; but then there were not very many within a few hundred miles of Nomah. It appeared to him that the prisoner known as Starlight, though from old police records his real name appeared to be—"

Here he drew himself up and faced the Judge in defiance. Then like lightning he seemed to change, and said—

"Your Honour, I submit that it can answer no good purpose to disclose my alleged name. There are others—I do not speak for myself."

The Judge stopped a bit; then hesitated. Starlight bowed. "I do not—a—know whether there is any

necessity to make public a name which many years since was not better known than honoured. I say the—a—prisoner known as Starlight has, from the evidence, taken the principal part in this nefarious transaction. It is not the first offence, as I observe from a paper I hold in my hand. The younger prisoner, Marston, has very properly been found guilty of criminal complicity with the same offence. It may be that he has been concerned in other offences against the law, but of that we have no proof before this Court. He has not been previously convicted. I do not offer advice to the elder criminal; his own heart and conscience, the promptings of which I assume to be dulled, not obliterated, I feel convinced, have said more to him in the way of warning, condemnation, and remorse than could the most impressive rebuke, the most solemn exhortation from a judicial bench. But to the younger man, to him whose vigorous frame has but lately attained the full development of early manhood, I feel compelled to appeal with all the weight which age and experience may lend. I adjure him to accept the warning which the sentence I am about to pass will convey to him, to endure his confinement with submission and repentance, and to lead during his remaining years, which may be long and comparatively peaceful, the free and necessarily happy life of an honest man. The prisoner Starlight is sentenced to seven years' imprisonment; the prisoner Richard Marston to five years' imprisonment; both in Berrima Gaol."

I heard the door of the dock unclose with a snap. We were taken out; I hardly knew how. I walked like a man in his sleep. "Five years, Berrima Gaol! Berrima Gaol!" kept ringing in my ears.

The day was done, the stars were out, as we moved

across from the Courthouse to the lock-up. The air was fresh and cool. The sun had gone down; so had the sun of our lives, never to rise again.

Morning came. Why did it ever come again? I thought. What did we want but night?—black as our hearts—dark as our fate—dismal as the death which likely would come quick as a living tomb, and the sooner the better. Mind you, I only felt this way the first time. All men do, I suppose, that havn't been born in gaols and workhouses. Afterwards they take a more every-day view of things.

"You're young and soft, Dick," Starlight said to me as we were rumbling along in the coach next day, with hand and leg-irons on, and a trooper opposite to us. "Why don't I feel like it? My good fellow, I have felt it all before. But if you sear your flesh or your horse's with a red-hot iron you'll find the flesh hard and callous ever after. My heart was seared once—aye, twice—and deeply, too. I have no heart now, or if I ever feel at all it's for a horse. I wonder how old Rainbow gets on."

"You were sorry father let us come in the first time," I said. "How do you account for that, if you've no heart?"

"Really! Well, listen, Richard. Did I? If you guillotine a man—cut off his head, as they do in France, with an axe that falls like the monkey of a pile-driver—the limbs quiver and stretch, and move almost naturally for a good while afterwards. I've seen the performance more than once. So I suppose the internal arrangements immediately surrounding my heart must have performed some kind of instinctive motion in your case and Jim's. By the way, where the deuce has Jim been all this time? Clever James!"

"Better ask Evans here if the police knows. It is not for want of trying if they don't."

"By the Lord Harry, no!" said the trooper, a young man who saw no reason not to be sociable. "It's the most surprisin' thing out where he's got to. They've been all round him, reg'lar cordon-like, and he must have disappeared into the earth or gone up in a balloon to get away."

CHAPTER XIX.

It took us a week's travelling or more to get to Berrima. Sometimes we were all night in the coach as well as all day. There were other passengers in the coach with us. Two or three bushmen, a station overseer with his wife and daughter, a Chinaman, and a lunatic that had come from Nomah, too. I think it's rough on the public to pack madmen and convicts in irons in the same coach with them. But it saves the Government a good deal of money, and the people don't seem to care. They stand it, anyhow.

We would have made a bolt of it if we'd had a chance, but we never had, night nor day, not half a one. The police were civil, but they never left us, and slept by us at night. That is, one watched while the other slept. We began to sleep soundly ourselves and to have a better appetite. Going through the fresh air had something to do with it, I daresay. And then there was no anxiety. We had played for a big stake and lost. Now we had to pay and make the best of it. It was the tenth day (there were no railways then to shorten the journey) when we drove up to the big gate and *looked* at the high walls and dark, heavy lines of Ber-

rima gaol, the largest, the most severe, the most dreaded of all the prisons in New South Wales. It had leaked out the day before, somehow, that the famous Starlight and the other prisoner in the great Momberah cattle robbery were to be brought in this particular day. There was a fair-sized crowd gathered as we were helped down from the coach. At the side of the crowd was a small mob af blacks with their dogs, spears, 'possum rugs and all complete. They and their gins and pickaninnies appeared to take great notice of the whole thing. One tallish gin, darker than the others, and with her hair tucked under an old bonnet, wrapped her 'possum cloak closely round her shoulders and pushed up close to us. She looked hard at Starlight, who appeared not to see her. As she drew back someone staggered against her; an angry scowl passed over her face, so savage and bitter that I felt quite astonished. I should have been astonished, I mean, if I had not been able, by that very change, to know again the restless eyes and grim set mouth of Warrigal.

It was only a look, and he was gone. The lock creaked, the great iron door swung back, and we were swallowed up in a tomb—a stone vault where men are none the less buried because they have separate cells. They do not live, though they appear to be alive; they move, and sometimes speak, and appear to hear words. Some have to be sent away and buried outside. They have been dead a long time, but have not seemed to want putting in the ground. That makes no change in them—not much, I mean. If they sleep it's all right; if they don't sleep anything must be happiness after the life they have escaped. "Happy are the dead" is written on all *prison walls.*

What I suffered in that first time no tongue can tell. I can't bear now to think of it and put it down. The solitary part of it was enough to drive any man mad that had been used to a free life. Day after day, night after night, the same and the same and the same over again.

Then the dark cells. I got into them for a bit. I wasn't always as cool as I might be—more times that mad with myself that I could have smashed my own skull against the wall, let alone anyone else's. There was one of the warders I took a dislike to from the first, and he to me, I don't doubt. I thought he was rough and surly. He thought I wanted to have my own way, and he made it up to take it out of me, and run me every way he could. We had a goodish spell of fighting over it, but he gave in at last. Not but what I'd had a lot to bear, and took a deal of punishment before he jacked up. I needn't have had it. It was all my own obstinacy and a sort of dogged feeling that made me feel I couldn't give in. I believe it done me good, though. I do really think I should have gone mad else, thinking of the dreadful long months and years that lay before me without a chance of getting out.

Sometimes I'd take a low fit and refuse my food, and very near give up living altogether. The least bit more, and I'd have died outright. One day there was a party of ladies and gentlemen came to be shown over the gaol. There was a lot of us passing into the exercise yard. I happened to look up for a minute, and saw one of the ladies looking steadily at us, and oh! what a pitying look there was in her face. In a moment I saw it was Miss Falkland, and, by the change that *came into* her face, that she knew me again, altered as

I was. I wondered how she could have known me. I was a different-looking chap from when she had seen me last. With a beastly yellow-gray suit of prison clothes, his face scraped smooth every day, like a fresh-killed pig, and the look of a free man gone out of his face for ever—how any woman, gentle or simple, ever can know a man in gaol beats me. Whether or no, she knew me. I suppose she saw the likeness to Jim, and she told him, true enough, she'd never forget him nor what he'd done for her.

I just looked at her, and turned my head away. I felt as if I'd make a fool of myself if I didn't. All the depth down that I'd fallen since I was shearing there at Boree rushed into my mind at once. I nearly fell down, I know. I was pretty weak and low then; I'd only just come out of the doctor's hands.

I was passing along with the rest of the mob. I heard her voice quite clear and firm, but soft and sweet, too. How sweet it sounded to me then!

"I wish to speak a few words to the third prisoner in the line—the tall one. Can I do so, Captain Wharton?"

"Oh! certainly, Miss Falkland," said the old gentleman, who had brought them all in to look at the wonderful neat garden, and the baths, and the hospital, and the unnatural washed-up, swept-up barracks that make the cleanest gaol feel worse than the roughest hut. He was the visiting magistrate, and took a deal of interest in the place, and believed he knew all the prisoners like a book. "Oh! certainly, my dear young lady. Is Richard Marston an acquaintance of yours?"

"He and his brother worked for my father at Boree," she said, quite stately. "His brother saved my life."

I was called back by the warder. Miss Falkland

stepped out before them all, and shook hands with me. Yes, *she shook hands with me,* and the tears came into her eyes as she did so.

If anything could have given a man's heart a turn the right way that would have done it. I felt again as if someone cared for me in the world, as if I had a soul worth saving. And people may talk as they like, but when a man has the notion that everybody has given him up as a bad job, and has dropped troubling themselves about him, he gets worse and worse, and meets the devil halfway.

She said—

"Richard Marston, I cannot tell how grieved I am to see you here. Both papa and I were so sorry to hear all about those Momberah cattle."

I stammered out something or other, I hardly knew what.

She looked at me again with her great beautiful eyes like a wondering child.

"Is your brother here too?"

"No, Miss Falkland," I said. "They've never caught Jim yet, and, what's more, I don't think they will. He jumped on a bare-backed horse without saddle or bridle, and got clear."

She looked as if she was going to smile, but she didn't. I saw her eyes sparkle, though, and she said softly—

"Poor Jim! so he got away; I am glad of that. What a wonderful rider he was! But I suppose he will be caught some day. Oh, I do so wish I could say anything that would make you repent of what you have done, and try and do better by-and-by. Papa says you *have* a long life before you most likely, and might do

ıch with it yet. Yon will try, for my sake; won't ow?"

I'll do what I can, miss," I said; "and if I ever see gain I'll tell him of your kindness."

Thank you, and good-bye," she said, and she held er hand again and took mine. I walked away, but ldn't help holding my head higher, and feeling a ɛnt man, somehow.

ain't much of a religious chap, wasn't then, and I ırther off it now than ever, but I've heard a power ɛ Bible and all that read in my time; and when the n read out next Sunday about Jesus Christ dying .en, and wanting to have their souls saved, I felt as ould have a show of understanding it better than I did before. If I'd been a Catholic, like Aileen and ɛr, I should have settled what the Virgin Mary was vhen she was alive, and never said a prayer to her ut thinking of Miss Falkland.

/hile I was dying one week and getting over it an- , and going through all the misery every fellow has ; first year of gaol, Starlight was just his old self all ime. He took it quite easy, never gave anyone le, and there wasn't a soul in the place that wouldn't done anything for him. The visiting magistrate ht his a most interesting case, and believed in his that he had been the means of turning him from rror of his ways—he and the chaplain between them, ɔw. He even helped him to be allowed to be kept .e separate from the other prisoners (lest they should minate him!), and in lots of ways made his life a ısier to him.

was reported about that it was not the first time ıe had been in a gaol. That he'd "done time," as

they call it, in another colony. He might or he might not. He never said. And he wasn't the man, with all his soft ways, you'd like to ask about such a thing.

By the look of it you wouldn't think he cared about it a bit. He took it very easy, read half his time, and had no sign about him that he wasn't perfectly satisfied. He intended when he got out to lead a new life, the chaplain said, and be the means of keeping other men right and straight.

One day we had a chance of a word together. He got the soft side of the chaplain, who thought he wanted to convert me and take me out of my sulky and obstinate state of mind. He took good care that we were not overheard or watched, and then said rather loud, for fear of accidents—

"Well, Richard, how are you feeling? I am happy to say that I have been led to think seriously of my former evil ways, and I have made up my mind, besides, to use every effort in my power to clear out of this infernal collection of tombstones when the moon gets dark again, about the end of this month."

"How have you taken to become religious?" I said. "Are you quite sure that what you say can be depended upon? And when did you get the good news?"

"I have had many doubts in my mind for a long [illegible]me," he said, "and have watched and prayed long, [illegible] listened for the word that was to come; and the end [illegible]t is that I have at length heard the news that makes [illegible] soul rejoice, even for the heathen, the boy Warrigal, [illegible] will be waiting outside these walls with fresh horses. [illegible]t now leave [illegible] dear Richard," he said; "and [illegible] my [illegible] made an impression on you.

When I have more to communicate for your good I will ask leave to return."

After I heard this news I began to live again. Was there a chance of our getting out of this terrible tomb into the free air and sunshine once more? However it was to be managed I could not make out. I trusted mostly to Starlight, who seemed to know everything, and to be quite easy about the way it would all turn out.

All that I could get out of him afterwards was that on a certain night a man would be waiting with two horses outside of the gaol wall; and that if we had the luck to get out safe, and he thought we should, we would be on their backs in three minutes, and all the police in New South Wales wouldn't catch us once we got five minutes' start.

This was all very well if it came out right; but there was an awful lot to be done before we were even near it. The more I began to think over it the worse it looked; sometimes I quite lost heart, and believed we should never have half a chance of carrying out our plan.

We knew from the other prisoners that men had tried from time to time to get away. Three had been caught. One had been shot dead—he was lucky—another had fallen off the wall and broke his leg. Two had got clear off, and had never been heard of since.

We were all locked up in our cells every evening, and at 5 o'clock, too. We didn't get out till 6 in the morning; a long, long time. Cold enough in the bitter winter weather, that had then come in, and a long, weary, wretched time to wait and watch for daylight.

Well, first of all, we had to get the cell door open. That was the easiest part of the lot. There's always men in a big gaol that all kinds of keys and locks are like

large print to. They can make most locks fly open like magic; what's more, they're willing to do it for anybody else, or show them how. It keeps their hand in; they have a pleasure in spiting those above them whenever they can do it.

The getting out of the cell was easy enough, but there was a lot of danger after you had got out. A passage to cross, where the warder, with his rifle, walked up and down every half-hour all night; then a big courtyard; then another smaller door in the wall; then the outer yard for those prisoners who are allowed to work at stone-cutting or out-of-door trades.

After all this there was the great outer wall to climb up and drop down from on the other side.

We managed to pick our night well. A French convict, who liked that sort of thing, gave me the means of undoing the cell door. It was three o'clock in the morning, when in winter most people are sleepy that haven't much on their minds. The warder that came down the passage wasn't likely to be asleep, but he might have made it up in his mind that all was right, and not taken as much notice as usual. This was what we trusted to. Besides, we had got a few five-pound notes smuggled into us; and though I wouldn't say that we were able to bribe any of the gaolers, we didn't do ourselves any harm in one or two little ways by throwing a few sovereigns about.

I did just as I was told by the Frenchman, and I opened the cell door as easy as a wooden latch. I had to shut it again for fear the warder would see it and begin to search and sound the alarm at once. Just as I'd done this he came down the passage. I had only time to crouch down in the shadow when he passed

me. That was right; now he would not be back for half-an-hour.

I crawled and scrambled, and crept along like a snake until little by little I got to the gate through the last wall but one. The lock here was not so easy as the cell door, and took me more time. While I stood there I was in a regular tremble with fright, thinking someone might come up, and all my chance would be gone. After a bit the lock gave way, and I found myself in the outer yard. I went over to the wall and crept along it till I came to one of the angles. There I was to meet Starlight. He was not there, and he was to bring some spikes to climb the wall with, and a rope, with two or three other things.

I waited and waited for half-an-hour, which seemed a month. What was I to do if he didn't come? I could not climb the 30-foot wall by myself. One had to be cautious, too, for there were towers at short distances along the wall; in every one of these a warder, armed with a rifle, which he was sure to empty at anyone that looked like gaol-breaking. I began to think he had made a mistake in the night. Then, that he had been discovered and caught the moment he tried to get out of the cell. I was sure to be caught if he was prevented from coming; and shutting up would be harder to bear than ever.

Then I heard a man's step coming up softly, I knew it was Starlight. I knew his step, and thought I would always tell it from a thousand other men's; it was so light and firm, so quick and free. Even in a prison it was different from other men's; and I remembered everything he had ever said about walking and running, both of which he was wonderfully good at.

He was just as cool as ever. "All right, Dick; take these spikes." He had half-a-dozen stout bits of iron; how ever he got them I know no more than the dead, but there they were, and a light strong coil of rope as well. I knew what the spikes were for, of course; to drive into the wall between the stones and climb up by. With the rope we were to drop ourselves over the wall the other side. It was 30 feet high—no fool of a drop. More than one man had been picked up disabled at the bottom of it. He had a short stout piece of iron that did to hammer the spikes in; and that had to be done very soft and quiet, you may be sure.

It took a long time. I thought the night would be over and the daylight come before it was all done; it was so slow. I could hear the tick-tack of his iron every time he knocked one of the spikes in. Of course he went higher every time. They were just far enough apart for a man to get his foot on from one to another. As he went up he had one end of the coil of the rope round his wrist. When he got to the top he was to draw it up to fasten to the top spike, and lower himself down by it to the ground on the other side. At last I felt him pull hard on the rope. I held it, and put my foot on the first spike. I don't know that I should have found it so very easy in the dark to get up by the spikes—it was almost blackfellows' work, when they put their big toe into a notch cut in the smooth stem of a gum tree that runs a hundred feet without a branch, and climb up the outside of it—but Jim and I had often practised this sort of climbing when we were boys, and were both pretty good at it. As for Starlight, he had been to sea when he was young, and could climb like a cat.

When I got to the top I could just see his head above

the wall. The rope was fastened well to the top spike, which was driven almost to the head into the wall. Directly he saw me, he began to lower himself down the rope, and was out of sight in a minute. I wasn't long after him, you may be sure. In my hurry I let the rope slip through my hands so fast they were sore for a week afterwards. But I didn't feel it then. I should hardly have felt it if I had cut them in two, for as my feet touched the ground in the darkness I heard the stamp of a horse's hoof and the jingle of a bit—not much of a sound, but it went through my heart like a knife, along with the thought that I was a free man once more; that is, free in a manner of speaking. I knew we couldn't be taken then, bar accidents, and I felt ready to ride through a regiment of soldiers.

As I stood up a man caught my hand and gave it a squeeze as if he'd have crushed my fingers in. I knew it was Jim. Of course, I'd expected him to be there, but wasn't sure if he'd be able to work it. We didn't speak, but started to walk over to where two horses were standing with a man holding 'em. It was pretty dark, but I could see Rainbow's star—just in his forehead it was—the only white he had about him. Of course it was Warrigal that was holding them.

"We must double-bank my horse," whispers Jim, "for a mile or two, till we're clear of the place; we didn't want to bring a lot of horses about."

He jumped up, and I mounted behind him. Starlight was on Rainbow in a second. The half-caste disappeared, he was going to keep dark for a few days and send us the news. Jim's horse went off as if he had only ten stone on his back instead of pretty nigh five-and-twenty. And we were free! Lord God! to think that men can be such fools as

ever to do anything of their own free will and guiding that puts their liberty in danger when there's such a world outside of a gaol wall—such a heaven on earth as long as a man's young and strong, and has all the feelings of a free man, in a country like this. Would I do the first crooked thing again if I had my life to live over again, and knew a hundredth part of what I know now? Would I put my hand in the fire out of laziness or greed? or sit still and let a snake sting me, knowing I should be dead in twelve hours? Any man's fool enough to do one that'll do the other. Men and women don't know this in time, that's the worst of it; they won't believe half they're told by them that do know and wish 'em well. They run on heedless and obstinate, too proud to take advice, till they do as we did. The world's always been the same, I suppose, and will to the end. Most of the books say so, anyway.

CHAPTER XX.

WHAT a different feel from prison air the fresh night breeze had as we swept along a lonely outside track! The stars were out, though the sky was cloudy now and then, and the big forest trees looked strange in the broken light. It was so long since I'd seen any. I felt as if I was going to a new world. None of us spoke for a bit. Jim pulled up at a small hut by the roadside; it looked like a farm, but there was not much show of crops or anything about the place. There was a tumble-down old barn, with a strong door to it, and a *padlock;* it seemed the only building that there was any *care taken* about. A man opened the door of the hut, *and looked* out.

"Look sharp," says Jim. "Is the horse all right and fit?"

"Fit enough to go for the Hawkesbury Guineas. I was up and fed him three hours ago. He's—"

"Bring him out, and be hanged to you," says Jim; "we've no time for chat."

The man went straight to the barn, and after a minute or two brought out a horse—the same I'd ridden from Gippsland, saddled and bridled, and ready to jump out of his skin. Jim leaned forward and put something into his hand, which pleased him, for he held my rein and stirrup, and then said—

"Good luck and a long reign to you," as we rode away.

All this time Starlight had sat on his horse in the shade of a tree a good bit away. When we started he rode alongside of us. We were soon in a pretty fair hand-gallop, and we kept it up. All our horses were good, and we bowled along as if we were going to ride for a week without stopping.

What a ride it was! It was a grand night, anyway I thought so. I blessed the stars, I know. Mile after mile, and still the horses seemed to go all the fresher the further they went. I felt I could ride on that way for ever. As the horses pulled and snorted and snatched at their bridles I felt as happy as ever I did in my life. Mile after mile it was all the same; we could hear Rainbow snorting from time to time and see his star move as he tossed up his head. We had many a night ride after together, but that was the best. We had laid it out to make for a place we knew not so far from home. We dursn't go there straight, of course, but nigh enough to *make a dart to it whenever* we had word that the coast *was clear.*

We knew directly we were missed the whole country-side would be turned out looking for us, and that every trooper within a hundred miles would be hoping for promotion in case he was lucky enough to drop on either of the Marstons or the notorious Starlight. His name had been pretty well in everyone's mouth before, and would be a little more before they were done with him.

It was too far to ride to the Hollow in a day, but Jim had got a place ready for us to keep dark in for a bit, in case we got clear off. There's never any great trouble in us chaps finding a home for a week or two, and somebody to help us on our way as long as we've the notes to chuck about. All the worse in the long run. We rode hardish (some people would have called it a hand-gallop) most of the way; uphill and down, across the rocky creeks, through thick timber. More than one river we had to swim. It was mountain water, and Starlight cursed and swore, and said he would catch his death of cold. Then we all laughed; it was the first time we'd done that since we were out. My heart was too full to talk, much less laugh, with the thought of being out of that cursed prison and on my own horse again, with the free bush breeze filling my breast, and the free forest I'd lived in all my life once more around me. I felt like a king, and as for what might come afterwards I had no more thought than a school-boy has of his next year's lessons at the beginning of his holidays. It might come now. As I took the old horse by the head and raced him down the mountain-side, I felt I was living again and might call myself a man once more.

The sun was just rising, the morning was misty and drizzling; the long sour-grass, the branches of the scrubby trees, everything we touched and saw was dripping with

the night dew, as we rode up a "gap" between two stiffish hills. We had been riding all night from track to track, sometimes steering by guesswork. Jim seemed to know the country in a general way, and he told us father and he had been about there a good deal lately, cattle-dealing and so on. For the last hour or so we had been on a pretty fair beaten road, though there wasn't much traffic on it. It was one of the old mail tracks once, but new coach lines had knocked away all the traffic. Some of the old inns had been good big houses, well kept and looked after then. Now lots of them were empty, with broken windows and everything in ruins; others were just good enough to let to people who would live in them, and make a living by cultivating a bit and selling grog on the sly. Where we pulled up was one of these places, and the people were just what you might expect.

First of all there was the man of the house, Jonathan Barnes, a tall, slouching, flash-looking native; he'd been a little in the horse-racing line, a little in the prize-fighting line—enough to have his nose broken, and was fond of talking about "pugs" as he'd known intimate—a little in the farming and carrying line, a little in every line that meant a good deal of gassing, drinking, and idling, and mighty little hard work. He'd a decent, industrious little wife, about forty times too good for him, and the girls, Bella and Maddie, worked well, or else he'd have been walking about the country with a swag on his back. They kept him and the house too, like many another man, and he took all the credit of it, and ordered them about as if he'd been the best and straightest man in the land. If he made a few pounds now and then he'd drop it on a horse-race before he'd had it a week. They were

glad enough to see us, anyhow, and made us comfortable, after a fashion. Jim had brought fresh clothes, and both of us had stopped on the road and rigged ourselves out, so that we didn't look so queer as men just out of the jug mostly do, with their close-shaved faces, cropped heads, and prison clothes. Starlight had brought a false moustache with him, which he stuck on, so that he looked as much like a swell as ever. Warrigal had handed him a small parcel, which he brought with him, just as we started; and, with a ring on his finger, some notes and gold in his pocket, he ate his breakfast, and chatted away with the girls as if he'd only ridden out for a day to have a look at the country.

Our horses were put in the stable and well looked to, you may be sure. The man that straps a cross cove's horse don't go short of his half-crown—two or three of them, maybe. We made a first-rate breakfast of it; what with the cold and the wet and not being used to riding lately, we were pretty hungry, and tired too. We intended to camp there that day, and be off again as soon as it was dark.

Of course we ran a bit of a risk, but not as bad as we should by riding in broad daylight. The hills on the south were wild and rangy enough, but there were all sorts of people about on their business in the daytime; and of course any of them would know with one look that three men, all on well-bred horses, riding right across country and not stopping to speak or make free with anyone, were likely to be "on the cross"—all the more if the police were making particular inquiries about them. We were all armed, too, now. Jim had seen to that. If we were caught, we intended to have a flutter for it. We were not going back to Berrima if we knew it.

So we turned in, and slept as if we were never going to wake again. We'd had a glass of grog or two, nothing to hurt, though; and the food and one thing and another made us sleep like tops. Jim was to keep a good look-out, and we didn't take off our clothes. Our horses were kept saddled, too, with the bridles on their heads, and only the bits out of their mouths—we could have managed without the bits at a pinch—everything ready to be out of the house in one minute, and in saddle and off full-split the next. We were learned that trick pretty well before things came to an end.

Besides that, Jonathan kept a good look-out, too, for strangers of the wrong sort. It wasn't a bad place in that way. There was a long stony track coming down to the house, and you could see a horseman or a carriage of any kind nearly a mile off. Then, in the old times, the timber had been cleared pretty nigh all round the place, so there was no chance of anyone sneaking up unknown to people. There couldn't have been a better harbour for our sort, and many a jolly spree we had there afterwards. Many a queer sight that old table in the little parlour saw years after, and the notes and gold and watches and rings and things I've seen the girls handling would have stunned you. But that was all to come.

Well, about an hour before dark Jim wakes us up, and we both felt as right as the bank. It took a good deal to knock either of us out of time in those days. I looked round for a bit and then burst out laughing.

"What's that about, Dick?" says Jim, rather serious.

"Blest if I didn't think I was in the thundering old cell again," I said. "I could have sworn I heard the bolt *snap as your foot* sounded in the room."

"*Well, I hope* we shan't, any of us, be shopped again

for a while," says he, rather slow like. "It's bad work, I'm afraid, and worse to come; but we're in it up to our neck and must see it out. We'll have another feed and be off at sundown. We've the devil's own ride before daylight."

"Anybody called?" says Starlight, sauntering in, washed and dressed and comfortable-looking. "You told them we were not at home, Jim, I hope."

Jim smiled in spite of himself, though he wasn't in a very gay humour. Poor old Jim was looking ahead a bit, I expect, and didn't see anything much to be proud of.

We had a scrumptious feed that night, beefsteaks and eggs, fresh butter and milk, things we hadn't smelt for months. Then the girls waited on us; a good-looking pair they was too, full of larks and fun of all kinds, and not very particular what sort of jokes they laughed at. They knew well enough, of course, where we'd come from, and what we laid by all day and travelled at night for; they thought none the worse of us for that, not they. They'd been bred up where they'd heard all kinds of rough talk ever since they was little kiddies, and you couldn't well put them out.

They were a bit afraid of Starlight at first, though, because they seen at once that he was a swell. Jim they knew a little of; he and father had called there a good deal the last season, and had done a little in the stock line through Jonathan Barnes. They could see I was something in the same line as Jim. So I suppose they had made it up to have a bit of fun with us that evening *before* we started. They came down into the parlour *where* our tea was, dressed out in their best and looking *very grand*, as I thought, particularly as we hadn't seen

the sight of so much as a woman's bonnet and shawl for months and months.

"Well, Mr. Marston," says the eldest girl, Bella, to Jim, "we didn't expect you'd travel this way with friends so soon. Why didn't you tell us, and we'd have had everything comfortable?"

"Wasn't sure about it," says Jim, "and when you ain't it's safest to hold your tongue. There's a good many things we all do that don't want talking about."

"I feel certain, Jim," says Starlight, with his soft voice and pleasant smile, which no woman as I ever saw could fight against long, "that any man's secret would be safe with Miss Bella. I would trust her with my life freely—not that it's worth a great deal."

"Oh! Captain," says poor Bella, and she began to blush quite innocent like, "you needn't fear; there ain't a girl from Shoalhaven to Albury that would let on which way you were heading, if they were to offer her all the money in the country."

"Not even a diamond necklace and earrings? Think of a lovely pendant, a cross all brilliants, and a brooch to match, my dear girl."

"I wouldn't 'come it,' unless I could get that lovely horse of yours," says the youngest one, Maddie; "but I'd do anything in the world to have him. He's the greatest darling I ever saw. Wouldn't he look stunning with a side-saddle? I've a great mind to 'duff' him myself one of these days."

"You shall have a ride on Rainbow next time we come," says Starlight. "I've sworn never to give him away or sell him, *that is* as long as I'm alive; but I'll tell *you what I'll do—I'll* leave him to you in my will."

"How do you mean?" says she, quite excited like.

"Why, if I drop one of these fine days—and it's on the cards any time—you shall have Rainbow; but, mind now, you're to promise me"—here he looked very grave—"that you'll neither sell him, nor lend him, nor give him away as long as you live."

"Oh! you don't mean it," says the girl, jumping up and clapping her hands; "I'd sooner have him than anything I ever saw in the world. Oh! I'll take such care of him. I'll feed him and rub him over myself; only I forgot, I'm not to have him before you're dead. It's rather rough on you, isn't it?"

"Not a bit," says Starlight; "we must all go when our time comes. If anything happens to me soon he'll be young enough to carry you for years yet. And you'll win all the ladies' hackney prizes at the shows."

"Oh! I couldn't take him."

"But you must now. I've promised him to you, and though I am a—well—an indifferent character, I never go back on my word."

"Haven't you anything to give me, Captain?" says Bella; "you're in such a generous mind."

"I must bring you something," says he, "next time we call. What shall it be? Now's the time to ask. I'm like the fellow in the 'Arabian Nights,' the slave of the ring—your ring." Here he took the girl's hand, and pretending to look at a ring she wore, took it up and kissed it. It wasn't a very ugly one neither. "What will you have, Bella?"

"I'd like a watch and chain," she said, pretending to look a little offended. "I suppose I may as well ask for a good thing at once."

Starlight pulled out a pocket-book, and, quite solemn and regular, made a note of it.

"It's yours," he said, "within a month. If I cannot conveniently call and present it in person, I'll send it by a sure hand, as they used to say; and now, Jim, boot and saddle."

The horses were out by this time; the groom was walking Rainbow up and down; he'd put a regular french-polish on his coat, and the old horse was arching his neck and chawing his bit as if he thought he was going to start for the Bargo Town Plate. Jonathan himself was holding our two horses, but looking at him.

"My word!" he said, "that's a real picture of a horse; he's too good for a—well—these roads; he ought to be in Sydney carrying some swell about and never knowing what a day's hardship feels like. Isn't he a regular out-and-outer to look at? and they tell me his looks is about the worst of him. Well—here's luck!" Starlight had called for drinks all round before we started. "Here's luck to roads and coaches, and them as lives by 'em. They'll miss the old coaching system some day—mark my word. I don't hold with these railways they're talkin' about—all steam and hurry-scurry; it starves the country."

"Quite right, Jonathan," says Starlight, throwing his leg over Rainbow, and chucking the old groom a sovereign. "The times have never been half as good as in the old coaching days, before we ever smelt a funnel in New South Wales. But there's a coach or two left yet, isn't there? and sometimes they're worth attending to."

He bowed and smiled to the girls, and Rainbow sailed off with his beautiful easy, springy stride. He always put me in mind of the deer I once saw at Mulgoa, near Penrith; I'd never seen any before. My word! how one of them sailed over a farmer's wheat paddock fence. He'd been in there all night, and when he saw

us coming he just up and made for the fence, and flew it like a bird. I never saw any horse have the same action only Rainbow. You couldn't tire him, and he was just the same the end of the day as the beginning. If he hadn't fallen into Starlight's hands as a colt he'd have been a second-class racehorse, and wore out his life among touts and ring-men. He was better where he was. Off we went; what a ride we had that night! Just as well we'd fed and rested before we started, else we should never have held out. All that night long we had to go, and keep going. A deal of the road was rough—near the Shoalhaven country, across awful deep gullies with a regular climb-up the other side, like the side of a house. Through dismal iron-bark forests that looked as black by night as if all the tree-trunks were cast iron and the leaves gun-metal. The night wasn't as dark as it might have been, but now and again there was a storm, and the whole sky turned as black as a wolf's throat, as father used to say. We got a few knocks and scrapes against the trees, but, partly through the horses being pretty clever in their kind of way, and having sharpish eyesight of our own, we pulled through. It's no use talking, sometimes I thought Jim must lose his way. Starlight told us he'd made up his mind that we were going round and round, and would fetch up about where we'd started from, and find the Moss Vale police waiting there for us.

"All right, Captain," says Jim; "don't you flurry yourself. I've been along this track pretty often this last few months, and I can steer by the stars. Look at the Southern Cross there; you keep him somewhere on the right shoulder, and you'll pull up not so very far off that black *range* above old Rocky Flat."

"You're not going to be so mad as to call at your

own place, Jim, are you?" says he. "Goring's sure to have a greyhound or two ready to slip in case the hare makes for her old form."

"Trust old dad for that," says Jim; "he knows Dick and you are on the grass again. He'll meet us before we get to the place and have fresh horses. I'll bet he's got a chap or two that he can trust to smell out the traps if they are close handy the old spot. They'll be mighty clever if they get on the blind side of father."

"Well, we must chance it, I suppose," I said; "but we were sold once, and I've not much fancy for going back again."

"They're all looking for you the other way this blessed minute, I'll go bail," says Jim. "Most of the coves that bolt from Berrima takes down the southern road to get across the border into Port Philip as soon as they can work it. They always fancy they are safer there."

"So they are in some ways; I wouldn't mind if we were back there again," I said. "There's worse places than Melbourne; but once we get to the Hollow, and that'll be some time to-day, we may take it easy and spell for a week or two. How they'll wonder what the deuce has become of us."

The night was long, and that cold that Jim's beard was froze as stiff as a board; but I sat on my horse, I declare to heaven, and never felt anything but pleasure and comfort to think I was loose again. You've seen a dog that's been chained up. Well, when he's let loose, don't he go chevying and racing about over everything and into everything that's next or anigh him? He'll jump into *water or over a fence*, and turn aside for nothing. *He's mad with joy and* the feeling of being off the chain;

he can't hardly keep from barking till he's hoar
rushing through and over everything till he's winc
done up. Then he lies down with his tongue c
considers it all over.

Well, a man's just like that when he's been
chain. He mayn't jump about so much, though I'
foreign fellows do that when their collar was unb
but he feels the very same things in his heart
dog does, you take my word for it.

So, as I said, though I was sitting on a horse
long, cold winter's night through, and had to m
eye a bit for the road and the rocks and the l
branches, I felt my heart swell that much and my
rise that I didn't care whether the night was going
into a snowstorm like we'd been in Kiandra w
whether we'd have a dozen rivers to swim, like th
waters of the M'Alister, in Gippsland, as nearly d
the pair of us. There I sat in my saddle like a
a dream, lettin' my horse follow Jim's up hill anc
dale, and half the time lettin' go his head and
him his own road. Everything, too, I seemed to
and to be pleased with somehow. Sometimes it
rock wallaby out on the feed that we'd come close
fore we saw one another, and it would jump away
under the horse's neck, taking two or three awf
springs and lighting square and level among the
after a drop-leap of a dozen feet, like a cat jump
of a window. But the cat's got four legs to bala
and the kangaroo only two. How they manage
measure the distance so well, God only knows. T
old 'possum would sing out, or a black-furred
squirrel—pongos, the blacks call 'em—would con
ing down from the top of an iron-bark tree, with

stern sails spread, as the sailors say, and into the branches of another, looking as big as an eagle-hawk. And then we'd come round the corner of a little creek flat and be into the middle of a mob of wild horses that had come down from the mountain to feed at night. How they'd scurry off through the scrub and up the range, where it was like the side of a house, and that full of slate-bars all upon edge that you could smell the hoofs of the brumbies as the sharp stones rasped and tore and struck sparks out of them like you do the parings in a blacksmith's shop.

Then, just as I thought daybreak was near, a great mopoke flits close over our heads without any rustling or noise, like the ghost of a bird, and begins to hoot in a big, bare, hollow tree just ahead of us. Hoo-hoo! hoo-hoo! The last time I heard it, it made me shiver a bit. Now I didn't care. I was a desperate man that had done bad things, and was likely to do worse. But I was free of the forest again, and had a good horse under me; so I laughed at the bird and rode on.

CHAPTER XXI.

DAYLIGHT broke when we were close up to the Black Range, safe enough, a little off the line but nothing to signify. Then we hit off the track that led over the Gap and down into a little flat on a creek that ran the same way as ours did.

Jim had managed for father and Warrigal to meet us somewhere near here with fresh horses. There was an old shepherd's hut that stood by itself almost covered with marsh-mallows and nettles. As we came down the

steep track a dog came up snuffing and searching about the grass and stones as if he'd lost something. It was Crib.

"Now we're getting home, Jim," says Starlight. "It's quite a treat to see the old scamp again. Well, old man," he says to the dog, "how's all getting on at the Hollow?" The dog came right up to Rainbow and rubbed against his fetlock, and jumped up two or three times to see if he could touch his rider. He was almost going to bark, he seemed that glad to see him and us.

Dad was sitting on a log by the hut smoking, just the same as he was before he left us last time. He was holding two fresh horses, and we were not sorry to see them. Horses are horses, and there wasn't much left in our two. We must have ridden a good eighty miles that night, and it was as bad as a hundred by daylight.

Father came a step towards us as we jumped off. By George, I was that stiff with the long ride and the cold that I nearly fell down. He'd got a bit of a fire, so we lit our pipes and had a comfortable smoke.

"Well, Dick, you're back agin, I see," he says, pretty pleasant for him. "Glad to see you, Captain, once more. It's been lonesome work—nobody but me and Jim and Warrigal, that's like a bear with a sore head half his time. I'd a mind to roll into him once or twice, and I should too only for his being your property like."

"Thank you, Ben, I'll knock his head off myself as soon as we get settled a bit. Warrigal's not a bad boy, but a good deal like a Rocky Mountain mule; he's no good unless he's knocked down about once a month or so, only he doesn't like anyone but me to do it."

"You'll see him about a mile on," says father. "He told me he'd be behind the big rock where the tree

grows—on the left of the road. He said he'd get you a fresh horse, so as he could take Rainbow back to the Hollow the long way round."

Sure enough after we'd just got well on the road again Warrigal comes quietly out from behind a big granite boulder and shows himself. He was riding Bilbah, and leading a well-bred, good-looking chestnut. He was one of the young ones out of the Hollow. He'd broken him and got him quiet. I remembered when I was there first spotting him as a yearling. I knew the blaze down his face and his three white legs.

Warrigal jumps off Bilbah and throws down the bridle. Then he leads the chestnut up to where Starlight was standing smoking, and throws himself down at his feet, bursting out crying like a child. He was just like a dog that had found his master again. He kept looking up at Starlight just like a dog does, and smiling and going on just as if he never expected to see such a good thing again as long as he lived.

"Well, Warrigal," says Starlight, very careless like, "so you've brought me a horse, I see. You've been a very good boy. Take Rainbow round the long way into the Hollow. Look after him, whatever you do, or I'll murder you. Not that he's done, or anything near it; but had enough for one ride, poor old man. Off with you!" He changed the saddle, and Warrigal hopped on to Bilbah, and led off Rainbow, who tossed his head and trotted away as if he'd lots to spare, and hadn't had 12 hours under saddle; best part without a halt or a bait. I've seen a few good 'uns in my time, but I never saw the horse that was a patch on Rainbow, take him all round.

We pushed on again, then, for ten miles, and somewhere about eight o'clock we pulled up at home—at

home. Aileen knew we were coming, and ran out to meet us. She threw her arms round me, and kissed and cried over me for ever so long before she took any notice of Starlight, who'd got down and was looking another way. "Oh! my boy, my boy," she said, "I never thought to see you again for years. How thin you've got and pale, and strange looking. You're not like your old self at all. But you're in the bush again now, by God's blessing. We must hide you better next time. I declare I begin to feel quite wicked, and as if I could fight the police myself."

"Well spoken, Miss Marston," said Starlight, just lifting his hat and making a bit of a bow like, just as if she was a real lady; but he was the same to all women. He treated them all alike with the same respect of manner as if they were duchesses; young or old, gentle or simple—it made no odds to him. "We must have your assistance if we're to do any good. Though whether it wouldn't be more prudent on your part to cut us all dead, beginning with your father, I shouldn't like to say."

Aileen looked at him, surprised and angry like for a second. Then she says—

"Captain Starlight, it's too late now; but words can never tell how I hate and despise the whole thing. My love for Dick got the better of my reason for a bit, but I could—Why, how pale you look!"

He was growing pale, and no mistake. He had been ill for a bit before he left Berrima, though he wouldn't give in, and the ride was rather too much for him, I suppose. Anyhow, down he tumbles in a dead faint. Aileen rushed over and lifted up his head. I got some water and dabbed it over him. After a bit he came to. He

raises himself on his elbows and looks at Aileen. Then he smiles quietly and says—

"I'm quite ashamed of myself. I'm growing as delicate as a young lady. I hope I haven't given you much trouble."

When he got up and walked to the verandah he quite staggered, showing he was that weak as he could hardly walk without help.

"I shall be all right," he said, "after a week's riding again."

"And where are you going when you leave this place?" she asked. "Surely you and my brothers never can live in New South Wales after all that has passed."

"We must try, at all events, Miss Marston," Starlight answered, raising up his head and looking proud. "You will hear something of us before long."

We made out that there was no great chance of our being run into at the old place. Father went on first with Crib. He was sure to give warning in some way, best known to father himself, if there was anyone about that wasn't the right sort. So we went up and went in.

Mother was inside. I thought it was queer that she didn't come outside. She was always quick enough about that when we came home before, day or night. When I went in I could see, when she got up from her chair, that she was weak, and looked as if she'd been ill. She looked ever so much older, and her hair was a lot grayer than it used to be.

She held out her arms and clung round my neck as if I'd been raised from the dead. So I was in a kind of a way. But she didn't say much, or ask what I was going to do next. Poor soul! she knew it couldn't be much good anyway; and that if we were hunted before,

we'd be worse hunted now. Those that hadn't heard of our little game with the Momberah cattle would hear of our getting out of Berrima gaol, which wasn't done every day.

We hadn't a deal of time to spare, because we meant to start off for the Hollow that afternoon, and get there some time in the night, even if it was late. Jim and dad knew the way in almost blindfold. Once we got there we could sleep for a week if we liked, and take it easy all roads. So father told mother and Aileen straight that we'd come for a good comfortable meal and a rest, and we must be off again.

"Oh! father, can't Dick and Jim stop for a day?" cries out Aileen. "It does seem so hard when we haven't seen Dick for such a while; and he shut up too all the time."

"D'ye want to have us all took the same as last time?" growls father. "Women's never contented as I can see. For two pins I wouldn't have brought them this way at all. I don't want to be making roads from this old crib to the Hollow, only I thought you'd like one look at Dick."

"We must do what's best, of course," said poor Aileen; "but it's hard—very hard on us. It's mother I'm thinking of, you know. If you knew how she always wakes up in the night, and calls for Dick, and cries when she wakes up, you'd try to comfort her a bit more, father."

"Comfort her!" says dad; "why, what can I do? Don't I tell you if we stay about here we're shopped as safe as anything ever was? Will that comfort her, or you *either*? We're safe to-day because I've got telegraphs on the outside that the police can't pass without ringing the bell—in a way of speaking. But you see to-morrow there'll

be more than one lot here, and I want to be clean away before they come."

"You know best," says Aileen; "but suppose they come here to-morrow morning at daylight, as they did last time, and bring a black tracker with them, won't he be able to follow up your track when you go away to-night?"

"No; he won't; for this reason, we shall all ride different ways as soon as we leave here. A good while before we get near the place where we all meet we shall find Warrigal on the look-out. He can take the Captain in by another track, and there'll be only Jim and I and the old dog, the only three persons that'll go in the near way."

"And when shall we see—see—any of you again?"

"Somewheres about a month, I suppose, if we've luck. There's a deal belongs to that. You'd better go and see what there is for us to eat. We've a long way and a rough way to go before we get to the Hollow."

Aileen was off at this, and then she set to work and laid a clean tablecloth in the sitting-room and set us down our meal—breakfast, or whatever it was. It wasn't so bad—corned beef, first-rate potatoes, fresh damper, milk, butter, eggs. Tea, of course, it's the great drink in the bush; and although some doctors say it's no good, what would bushmen do without it?

We had no intention of stopping the whole night, though we were tempted to do so—to have one night's rest in the old place where we used to sleep so sound before. It was no good thinking of anything of that kind, anyhow, for a good while to come. What we'd got to do was to look out sharp and not be caught simple again like we was both last time.

After we had our tea we sat outside the verandah,

and tried to make the best of it. Jim stayed inside with mother for a good while; she didn't leave her chair much now, and sat knitting by the hour together. There was a great change come over her lately. She didn't seem to be afraid of our getting caught as she used to be, nor half as glad or sorry about anything. It seemed like as if she'd made up her mind that everything was as bad as it could be, and past mending. So it was; she was right enough there. The only one who was in real good heart and spirits was Starlight. He'd come round again, and talked and rattled away, and made Aileen and Jim and me laugh, in spite of everything. He said we had all fine times before us now for a year or two, any way. That was a good long time. After that anything might happen. What it would be he neither knew nor cared. Life was made up of short bits; sometimes it was hard luck; sometimes everything went jolly and well. We'd got our liberty again, our horses, and a place to go to, where all the police in the country would never find us. He was going in for a short life and a merry one. He, for one, was tired of small adventures, and he was determined to make the name of Starlight a little more famous before very long. If Dick and Jim would take his advice—the advice of a desperate, ill-fated outcast, but still staunch to his friends—they would clear out, and leave him to sink or swim alone, or with such associates as he might pick up, whose destination would be no great matter whatever befell them. They could go into hiding for awhile—make for Queensland and then go into the northern territory. There was new *country* enough there to hide all the fellows that were *"wanted"* in New South Wales.

"But why don't you take your own advice?" said

Aileen, looking over at Starlight as he sat there quite careless and comfortable-looking, as if he'd no call to trouble his head about anything. "Isn't your life worth mending or saving? Why keep on this reckless miserable career which you yourself expect to end ill?"

"If you ask me, Miss Marston," he said, "whether my life—what is left of it—is worth saving, I must distinctly answer that it is not. It is like the last coin or two in the gambler's purse, not worth troubling one's head about. It must be flung on the board with the rest. It might land a reasonable stake. But as to economizing and arranging details that would surely be the greatest folly of all."

I heard Aileen sigh to herself. She said nothing for a while; and then old Crib began to growl. He got up and walked along the track that led up the hill. Father stood up, too, and listened. We all did except Starlight, who appeared to think it was too much trouble, and never moved or seemed to notice.

Presently the dog came walking slowly back, and coiled himself up again close to Starlight, as if he had made up his mind it didn't matter. We could hear a horse coming along at a pretty good bat over the hard, rocky, gravelly road. We could tell it was a single horse, and more than that, a barefooted one, coming at a hand-gallop up hill and down dale in a careless kind of manner. This wasn't likely to be a police trooper. One man wouldn't come by himself to a place like ours at night; and no trooper, if he did come, would clatter along a hard track, making row enough to be heard more than a mile off on a quiet night.

"It's all right," says father. "The old dog knowed him; it's Billy the Boy. There's something up."

Just as he spoke we saw a horseman come in sight; and he rattled down the stony track as hard as he could lick. He pulled up just opposite the house, close by where we were standing. It was a boy about fifteen, dressed in a ragged pair of moleskin trousers, a good deal too large for him, but kept straight by a leather strap round the waist. An old cabbage-tree hat and a blue serge shirt made up the rest of his rig. Boots he had on, but they didn't seem to be fellows, and one rusty spur. His hair was like a hay-coloured mop, half hanging over his eyes, which looked sharp enough to see through a gum-tree and out at the other side.

He jumped down and stood before us, while his horse's flanks heaved up and down like a pair of bellows.

"Well, what's up?" says father.

"My word, governor, you was all in great luck as I come home last night, after bein' away with them cattle to pound. Bobby, he don't know a p'leeceman from a wood-an'-water joey; he'd never have dropped they was comin' here unless they'd pasted up a notice on the door."

"How did you find out, Billy?" says father, "and when'll they be here?"

"Fust thing in the morning," says the young wit, grinning all over his face. "Won't they be jolly well sold when they rides up and plants by the yard, same as they did last time, when they took Dick."

"Which ones was they?" asks father, fillin' his pipe quite business-like, just as if he'd got days to spare.

"Them two fellers from Bargo; one of 'em's a new chum—got his hair cut short, just like Dick's. My *word*, I thought he'd been waggin' it from some o' them *Gov'ment* institoosh'ns. I did raly, Dick, old man."

"You're precious free and easy, my young friend,"

says Starlight, walking over. "I rather like you. You have a keen sense of humour, evidently; but can't you say how you found out that the men were Her Majesty's police officers in pursuit of us?"

"You're Cap'n Starlight, I suppose," says the youngster, looking straight and square at him, and not a bit put out. "Well, I've been pretty quick coming; thirty mile inside of three hours, I'll be bound. I heard them talking about you. It was Starlight this and Starlight that all the time I was going in and out of the room, pretending to look for something, and mother scolding me."

"Had they their uniform on?" I asked.

"No fear. They thought we didn't tumble, I expect; but I seen their horses hung up outside, both shod all round; bits and irons bright. Stabled horses, too, I could swear. Then the youngest chap—him with the old felt hat—walked like this."

Here he squared his shoulders, put his hands by his side, and marched up and down, looking for all the world like one of them chaps that played at soldiering in Bargo.

"There's no hiding the military air, you think, Billy?" said Starlight. "That fellow was a recruit, and had been drilled lately."

"I d'no. Mother got 'em to stay, and began to talk quite innocent-like of the bad characters there was in the country. Ha! ha! It was as good as a play. Then they began to talk almost right out about Sergeant Goring having been away on a wrong scent, and how wild he was, and how he would be after Starlight's mob to-morrow morning at daylight, and some p'leece was to *meet him near Rocky* Flat. They didn't say they was *the p'leece; that was* about four o'clock, and getting dark."

"How did you get the horse?" says Jim. "He's not one of yours, is he?"

"Not he," says the boy; "I wish I had him or the likes of him. He belongs to old Driver. I was just workin' it how I'd get out and catch our old moke without these chaps being fly as I was going to talligrarph, when mother says to me—

"'Have you fetched in the black cow?'

"We ain't got no black cow, but I knowed what she meant. I says—

"'No, I couldn't find her.'

"'You catch old Johnny Smoker and look for her till you do find her, if it's ten o'clock to-night,' says mother, very fierce. 'Your father'll give you a fine larrupin' if he comes home and there's that cow lost.'

"So off I goes and mans old Johnny, and clears out straight for here. When I came to Driver's I runs his horses up into a yard nigh the angle of his outside paddock and collars this little 'oss, and lets old Johnny go in hobbles. My word, this cove can scratch!"

"So it seems," says Starlight; "here's a sovereign for you, youngster. Keep your ears and eyes open; you'll always find that good information brings a good price. I'd advise you to keep away from Mr. Marston, sen., and people of his sort, and stick to your work, if I thought there was the least earthly chance of your doing so; but I see plainly that you're not cut out for the industrious, steady-going line."

"Not if I know it," said the boy; "I want to see life before I die. I'm not going to keep on milling and *slaving* day after day all the year round. I'll cut it next *year* as sure as a gun. I say, won't you let me ride a *bit of the* way with ye?"

"Not a yard," says father, who was pretty cranky by this time; "you go home again and put that horse where you got him. We don't want old Driver tracking and swearing after us because you ride his horses; and keep off the road as you go back."

Billy the Boy nodded his head, and jumping into his saddle, rode off again at much about the same pace he'd come at. He was a regular reckless young devil, as bold as a two-year-old colt in a branding-yard, that's ready to jump at anything and knock his brains out against a stockyard post, just because he's never known any real regular hurt or danger, and can't realize it. He was terrible cruel to horses, and would ruin a horse in less time than any man or boy I ever seen. I always thought from the first that he'd come to a bad end. Howsoever, he was a wonderful chap to track and ride; none could beat him at that; he was nearly as good as Warrigal in the bush. He was as cunning as a pet dingo, and would look as stupid before anyone he didn't know, or thought was too respectable, as if he was half an idiot. But no one ever stirred within twenty or thirty miles of where he lived without our hearing about it. Father fished him out, having paid him pretty well for some small service, and ever after that he said he could sleep in peace.

We had the horses up, ready saddled and fed, by sundown, and as soon as the moon rose we made a start of it. I had time for a bit of a talk with Aileen about the Storefields, though I couldn't bring myself to say their names at first. I was right in thinking that Gracey had seen me led away a prisoner by the police. She came into the hut afterwards with Aileen, as soon as mother was better, and the two girls sat down beside one another and cried their eyes out, Aileen said.

George Storefield had been very good, and told Aileen that, whatever happened us or the old man, it would make no difference to him or to his feelings towards her. She thanked him, but said she could never consent to let him disgrace himself by marrying into a family like ours. He had come over every now and then, and had seen they wanted for nothing when father and Jim were away; but she always felt her heart growing colder towards him and his prosperity while we were so low down in every way. As for Gracey, she (Aileen) believed that she was in love with me in a quiet, steady way of her own, without showing it much, but that she would be true to me, if I asked her, to the end of the world, and she was sure that she could never marry anyone else as long as I lived. She was that sort of girl. So didn't I think I ought to do everything I could to get a better character, and try and be good enough for such a girl? She knew girls pretty well. She didn't think there was such another girl in the whole colony, and so on.

And when we went away where were we going to hide? I could not say about particular distances, but I told her generally that we'd keep out of harm's way, and be careful not to be caught. We might see her and mother now and then, and by bush-telegraphs and other people we could trust should be able to send news about ourselves.

"What's the Captain going to do?" she said suddenly. "He doesn't look able to bear up against hardship like the rest of you. What beautiful small hands he has, and his eyes are like sleeping fires."

"Oh, he's a good deal stronger than he looks," I said; "he's the smartest of the lot of us, except it is dad, and I've heard the old man say he must knock under to

him. But don't you bother your head about him; he's quite able to take care of himself, and the less a girl like you thinks about a man like him the better for her."

"Oh, nonsense," she said, at the same time looking down in a half-confused sort of a way. "I'm not likely to think about him or anyone else just now; but it seems such a dreadful thing to think a man like him, so clever and daring, and so handsome and gentle in his ways, should be obliged to lead such a life, hunted from place to place like—like—"

"Like a bushranger, Ailie," I said, "for that'll be the long and short of it. You may as well know it now, we're going to 'turn out.'"

"You don't say that, Dick," she said. "Oh! surely you will never be so mad. Do you want to kill mother and me right out? If you do, why not take a knife or an axe and do it at once? Her you've been killing all along. As for me, I feel so miserable and degraded and despairing at times that but for her I could go and drown myself in the creek when I think of what the family is coming to."

"What's the use of going on like that, Aileen?" I said roughly. "If we're caught now, whatever we do, great or small, we're safe for years and years in gaol. Mayn't we as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb? What odds can it make? We'll only have bolder work than duffing cattle and faking horse-brands like a lot of miserable crawlers that are not game for anything more sporting."

"I hear, I hear," says sister, sitting down and putting her head in her hands. "Surely the devil has power for a season to possess himself of the souls of men, and do with them what he will. I know how obstinate you are,

Dick. Pray God you may not have poor Jim's blood to answer for as well as your own before all is done. Good-bye. I can't say God bless you, knowing what I do; but may He turn your heart from all wicked ways, and keep you from worse and deadlier evil than you have committed! Good-night. Why, oh why, didn't we all die when we were little children!"

CHAPTER XXII.

I BROUGHT it out sudden-like to Aileen before I could stop myself, but it was all true. How we were to make the first start we couldn't agree; but we were bound to make another big touch, and this time the police would be after us for something worth while. Anyhow, we could take it easy at the Hollow for a bit, and settle all the ins and outs without hurrying ourselves.

Our dart now was to get to the Hollow that night some time, and not to leave much of a track either. Nobody had found out the place yet, and wasn't going to if we knew. It was too useful a hiding-place to give away without trouble, and we swore to take all sorts of good care to keep it secret, if it was to be done by the art of man.

We went up Nulla mountain the same way as we remembered doing when Jim and I rode to meet father that time he had the lot of weaners. We kept wide and didn't follow on after one another so as to make a marked trail. It was a long, dark, dreary ride. We had to look sharp so as not to get dragged off by a breast-high bough in the thick country. There was no fetching a doctor if anyone was hurt. Father rode ahead. He knew the ins and

outs of the road better than any of us, though Jim, who had lived most of his time in the Hollow after he got away from the police, was getting to know it pretty well. We were obliged to go slow mostly—for a good deal of the track lay along the bed of a creek, full of boulders and rocks, that we had to cross ever so many times in a mile. The sharp-edged rocks too overhung low enough to knock your brains out if you didn't mind.

It was far into the night when we got to the old yard. There it stood, just as I recollect seeing it the time Jim and I and father branded the weaners. It had only been used once or twice since. It was patched up a bit in places, but nobody seemed to have gone next or nigh it for a long time. The grass had grown up round the sliprails; it was as strange and forsaken-looking as if it belonged to a deserted station.

As we rode up a man comes out from an angle of the fence and gives a whistle. We knew, almost without looking, that it was Warrigal. He'd come there to meet Starlight and take him round some other way. Every track and short cut there was in the mountains was as easy to him as the road to George Storefield's was to us. Nulla mountain was full of curious gullies and caves and places that the devil himself could hardly have run a man to ground in, unless he'd lived near it all his life as Warrigal had. He wasn't very free in showing them to us, but he'd have made a bridge of his own body any time to let Starlight go safe. So when they rode away together we knew he was safe whoever might be after us, and that we should see him in the Hollow some time next day.

We went on for a mile or two further; then we got off, and turned our horses loose. The rest of the way

we had to do on foot. My horse and Jim's had got regularly broke into Rocky Flat, and we knew that they'd go home as sure as possible, not quite straight, but keeping somewhere in the right direction. As for father he always used to keep a horse or two, trained to go home when he'd done with him. The pony he rode to-night would just trot off, and never put his nose to the ground almost till he got wind of home.

We humped our saddles and swags ourselves; a stiffish load too, but the night was cool, and we did our best. It was no use growling. It had to be done, and the sooner the better. It seemed a long time—following father step by step—before we came to the place where I thought the cattle were going to be driven over the precipice. Here we pulled up for a bit and had a smoke. It was a queer time and a queer look out.

Three o'clock in the morning—the stars in the sky, and it so clear that we could see Nulla mountain rising up against it a big black lump, without sign of tree or rock; underneath the valley, one sea of mist, and we just agoing to drop into it; on the other side of the Hollow, the clear hill we called the Sugarloaf. Everything seemed dead, silent, and solitary, and a rummier start than all, here were we—three desperate men, driven to make ourselves a home in this lonesome, God-forsaken place! I wasn't very fanciful by that time, but if the devil had risen up to make a fourth amongst us I shouldn't have been surprised. The place, the time, and the men seemed regularly cut out for him and his mob.

We smoked our pipes out, and said nothing to each other, good or bad. Then father makes a start, and we follows him; took a goodish while, but we got down all right, and headed for the cave. When we got there our

troubles were over for a while. Jim struck a match and had a fire going in no time; there was plenty of dry wood, of course. Then father rolls a keg out of a hole in the wall; first-rate dark brandy it was, and we felt a sight better for a good stiff nip all round. When a man's cold and tired, and hungry, and down on his luck as well, a good caulker of grog don't do him no harm to speak of. It strings him up and puts him straight. If he's anything of a man he can stand it, and feel all the better for it; but it's a precious sight too easy a lesson to learn, and there's them that can't stop, once they begin, till they've smothered what brains God Almighty put inside their skulls, just as if they was to bore a hole and put gunpowder in. No! they wouldn't stop if they were sure of going to heaven straight, or to hell next minute if they put the last glass to their lips. I've heard men say it, and knew they meant it. Not the worst sort of men, either.

We were none of us like that. Not then, anyhow. We could take or leave it, and though dad could do with his share when it was going, he always knew what he was about, and could put the peg in any time. So we had one strongish tot while the tea was boiling. There was a bag of ship biscuit; we fried some hung beef, and made a jolly good supper. We were that tired we didn't care to talk much, so we made up the fire last thing and rolled ourselves in our blankets; I didn't wake till the sun had been up an hour or more.

I woke first; Jim was fast asleep, but dad had been up a goodish while and got things ready for breakfast. It was a fine, clear morning; everything looked beautiful, 'specially to me that had been locked up away from this sort of thing so long. The grass was thick and green

round the cave, and right up to the big sandstone slabs of the floor, looking as if it had never been eat down very close. No more it had. It would never have paid to have overstocked the Hollow. What cattle and horses they kept there had a fine time of it, and were always in grand condition.

Opposite where we were the valley was narrow. I could see the sandstone precipices that walled us in, a sort of yellowish, white colour, all lighted up with the rays of the morning sun, looking like gold towers against the heavy green forest timber at the foot of them. Birds were calling and whistling, and there was a little spring that fell drip, drip over a rough rock basin all covered with ferns. A little mob of horses had fed pretty close up to the camp, and would walk up to look curious-like, and then trot off with their heads and tails up. It was a pretty enough sight that met my eyes on waking. It made me feel a sort of false happiness for a time, to think we had such a place to camp in on the quiet, and call our own, in a manner of speaking.

Jim soon woke up and stretched himself. Then father began, quite cheerful like—

"Well, boys, what d'ye think of the Hollow again? It's not a bad earth for the old dog-fox and his cubs when the hounds have run him close. They can't dig him out here, or smoke him out either. We've no call to do anything but rest ourselves for a week or two anyhow; then we must settle on something and buckle to it more business-like. We've been too helter-skelter lately, Jim and I. We was beginning to run risks, got nearly dropped on more nor once."

There's no mistake, it's a grand thing to wake up and know you've got nothing to do for a bit but to take

it easy and enjoy yourself. No matter how light your work may be, if it's regular and has to be done every day, the harness'll gall somewhere; you get tired in time and sick of the whole thing.

Jim and I knew well that, bar accidents, we were as safe in the Hollow as we used to be in our beds when we were boys. We'd searched it through and through last time, till we'd come to believe that only three or four people, and those sometimes not for years at a time, had ever been inside of it. There were no tracks of more.

We could see how the first gang levied; they were different. Every now and then they had a big drink—"a mad carouse," as the books say—when they must have done wild, strange things, something like the Spanish Main buccaneers we'd read about. They'd brought captives with them, too. We saw graves, half-a-dozen together, in one place. *They* didn't belong to the band.

We had a quiet, comfortable meal, and a smoke afterwards. Then Jim and I took a long walk through the Hollow, so as to tell one another what was in our minds, which we hadn't a chance to do before. Before we'd gone far Jim pulls a letter out of his pocket and gives it to me.

"It was no use sending it to you, old man, while you was in the jug," he says; "it was quite bad enough without this, so I thought I'd keep it till we were settled a bit like. Now we're going to set up in business on our own account you'd best look over your mail."

I knew the writing well, though I hadn't seen it lately. It was from her—from Kate Morrison that was. It began, not the way most women write, like *her,* though.

"So this is the end of your high and mighty doings, Richard Marston, passing yourself and Jim off as squatters. I don't blame him—no, of course not, nobody ever blamed Jim, or would, I suppose, if he'd burned down Government House and stuck up his Excellency as he was coming out of church—but when I saw in the papers that you had been arrested for cattle-stealing I knew for the first time how completely Jeanie and I had been duped.

"I won't pretend that I didn't think of the money you were said to have, and how pleasant it would be to spend some of it after the miserable, scrambling, skimping life we had lately been used to. But I loved you, Dick Marston, for *yourself*, with a deep and passionate love which you will never know now, which you would scorn and treat lightly, perhaps, if you did know. You may yet find out what you have lost, if ever you get out of that frightful gaol.

"I was not such a silly fool as to pine and fret over our romance so cruelly disturbed, though Jeanie was; it nearly broke her heart. No, Richard, my nature is not of that make. I generally get even with people who wrong me. I send you a photo, giving a fair idea of myself and my *husband,* Mr. Mullockson. I accepted his offer soon after I saw your adventures, and those of your friend Starlight, in every newspaper in the colonies. I did not hold myself bound to live single for your sake, so did what most women do, though they pretend to act from other motives, I disposed of myself to the best advantage.

"Mr. Mullockson has plenty of money, which is *nearly* everything in this world, so that I am comfortable and *well* off, as far as that goes. If I am not happy that is

'our fault—your fault, I say, because I am not able to ear your false image and false self from my thoughts. Whatever happens to me in the future you may consider 'ourself to blame for. I should have been a happy and airly good woman, as far as women go, if you had been rue, or rather if everything about you had not been ıtterly false and despicable.

"You think it fortunate after reading this, I daresay, hat we are separated for ever, *but we may meet again,* Richard Marston. *Then* you may have reason to curse he day, as I do most heartily, when you first set yes on

"KATE MULLOCKSON."

Not a pleasant letter, by no manner of means. I was lad I didn't get it while I was eating my heart out ınder the stifling low roof of the cell at Nomah, or when was bearing my load at Berrima. A few pounds more vhen the weight was all I could bear and live would ıave crushed the heart out of me. I didn't want anyhing to cross me when I was looking at mother and ıileen and thinking how, between us, we'd done everyhing our worst enemy could have wished us to do. But ere, when there was plenty of time to think over old ays and plan for the future, I could bear the savage, piteful sound of the whole letter and laugh at the way he had got out of her troubles by taking up with a ɔugh old fellow whose cheque-book was the only decent hing about him. I wasn't sorry to be rid of her either. ince I'd seen Gracey Storefield again every other woman eemed disagreeable to me. I tore up the letter and hrew it away, hoping I had done for ever with a woman hat no man living would ever have been the better for.

"Glad you take it so quiet," Jim says, after holding his tongue longer than he did mostly. "She's a bad, cold-hearted jade, though she is Jeanie's sister. If I thought my girl was like her she'd never have another thought from me, but she isn't, and never was. The worse luck I've had the closer she's stuck to me, like a little brick as she is. I'd give all I ever had in the world if I could go to her and say, 'Here I am, Jim Marston, without a penny in the world, but I can look every man in the face, and we'll work our way along the road of life cheerful and loving together.' But *I can't* say it, Dick, that's the devil of it, and it makes me so wild sometimes that I could knock my brains out against the first iron-bark tree I came across."

I didn't say anything, but I took hold of Jim's hand and shook it. We looked in each other's eyes for a minute; there was no call to say anything. We always understood one another, Jim and I.

As we were safe to stop in the Hollow for long spells at a time we took a good look over it, as far as we could do on foot. We found a rum sort of place at the end of a long gully that went easterly from the main flat. In one way you'd think the whole valley had been an arm of the sea some time or other. It was a bit like Sydney Harbour in shape, with one principal valley and no end of small cover and gullies running off from it, and winding about in all directions. Even the sand-stone walls, by which the whole affair, great and small, was hemmed in, were just like the cliff about South Head; there were lines, too, on the face of them, Jim and I made out, just like where the waves had washed marks and levels on the sea-rock. We didn't trouble *ourselves* much about that part of it. Whatever might

have been there once, it grew stunning fine grass now, and there was beautiful clear fresh water in all the creeks that ran through it.

Well, we rambled up the long, crooked gully that I was talking about till about half way up it got that narrow that it seemed stopped by a big rock that had tumbled down from the top and blocked the path. It was pretty well grown over with wild raspberries and climbers.

"No use going further," says Jim, "there's nothing to see."

"I don't know that. Been a track here some time. Let's get round and see."

When we got round the rock the track was plain again; it had been well worn once, though neither foot or hoof much had been along it for many a year. It takes a good while to wear out a track in a dry country.

The gully widened out bit by bit, till at last we came to a little round green flat, right under the rock walls which rose up a couple of thousand feet above it on two sides. On the flat was an old hut—very old it seemed to be, but not in bad trim for all that. The roof was of shingles, split, thick, and wedge shaped; the walls of heavy iron-bark slabs, and there was a stone chimney.

Outside had been a garden; a few rose trees were standing yet, ragged and stunted. The wallabies had trimmed them pretty well, but we knew what they were. Been a corn-patch too—the marks where it had been hoed up were there, same as they used to do in old times when there were more hoes than ploughs and more convicts than horses and working bullocks in the country.

"Well, this is a rum start," says Jim, as we sat down on a log outside that looked as if it had been used for

a seat before. "Who the deuce ever built this gunyah and lived in it by himself for years and years? You can see it was no two or three months' time he done here. There's the spring coming out of the rock he dipped his water from. The tracks reg'lar worn smooth over the stones leading to it. There was a fence round this garden, some of the rails lying there rotten enough, but it takes time for sound hard wood to rot. He'd a stool and table too, not bad ones either, this Robinson Crusoe cove. No end of manavilins either. I wonder whether he come here before them first—Government men—chaps we heard of. Likely he did and died here too. He might have chummed in with them, of course, or he might not. Perhaps Starlight knows something about him, or Warrigal. We'll ask them."

We fossicked about for a while to see if the man who lived so long by himself in this lonely place had left anything behind him to help us make out what sort he was. We didn't find much. There was writing on the walls here and there, and things cut on the fireplace posts. Jim couldn't make head or tail of them, nor me either.

"The old cove may have left something worth having behind him," he said, after staring at the cold hearth ever so long. "Men like him often leave gold pieces and jewels and things behind them, locked up in brass-bound boxes; leastways the story-books say so. I've half a mind to root up the old hearthstone; it's a thundering heavy one, ain't it? I wonder how he got it here all by himself."

"It *is* pretty heavy," I said. "For all we know he may have had help to bring it in. We've no time now to see into it; we'd better make tracks and see if Starlight has made back. We shall have to shape after a bit, and we may as well see how he stands affected."

"He'll be back safe enough. There's no pull in being outside now with all the world chivying after you and only half rations of food and sleep."

Jim was right. As we got up to the cave we saw Starlight talking to the old man and Warrigal letting go the horse. They'd taken their time to come in, but Warrigal knew some hole or other where they'd hid before very likely, so they could take it easier than we did the night we left Rocky Creek.

"Well, boys!" says Starlight, coming forward quite heartily, "glad to see you again; been taking a walk and engaging yourselves this fine weather? Rather nice country residence of ours, isn't it? Wonder how long we shall remain in possession! What a charm there is in home! No place like home, is there, governor?"

Dad didn't smile, he very seldom did that, but I always thought he never looked so glum at Starlight as he did at most people.

"The place is well enough," he growled, "if we don't smother it all by letting our tracks be followed up. We've been dashed lucky so far, but it'll take us all we know to come in and out, if we've any roadwork on hand, and no one the wiser."

"It can be managed well enough," says Starlight. "Is that dinner ever going to be ready? Jim, make the tea, there's a good fellow; I'm absolutely starving. The main thing is never to be seen together except on great occasions. Two men, or three at the outside, can stick up any coach or travellers that are worth while. We can get home one by one without half the risk there would be if we were all together. Hand me the corned beef, if you please, Dick. We must hold a council of war by-and-by."

We were smoking our pipes and lying about dry floor of the cave, with the sun coming in just to make it pleasant, when I started the ball.

"We may as well have it out now what la going upon and whether we're all agreed in ou *to turn out,* and do the thing in the regular go fashioned Sydney-side style. It's risky, of cour we're sure to have a smart brush or two; but going to be jugged again, not if I know it, and see but what bushranging—yes, *bushranging,* it's saying one thing and meaning another—ain't as game, let alone the profits of it, as mooching abo duffing and being lagged in the long run all the

CHAPTER XXIII.

"BECAUSE it's too late," growled father; "too years. It's sink or swim with all of us. If we v gether we may make ten thousand pounds or r the next four or five years, enough to clear out w gether if we've luck. If any of us goes snivelling and giving himself up, they'd know there's so crooked with the lot of us, and they'll run us dow how. I'll see 'em all in the pit of h—I before I and if Jim does, he opens the door and sells the us. You can both do what you like." And h old man walked bang away and left us.

"No use, Dick," says Jim. "If he won't it's my giving in. I can't stand being thought a Besides, if you were nabbed afterwards people mi it was through me. I'd sooner be killed and b *dozen* times over than that. It's no use talking—

to be—we had better make up our minds once for all, and then let the matter drop."

Poor old Jim. He had gone into it innocent from the very first. He was regular led in because he didn't like to desert his own flesh and blood, even if it was wrong. Bit by bit he had gone on, not liking or caring for the thing one bit, but following the lead of others, till he reached his present pitch. How many men, and women, too, there are in the world who seem born to follow the lead of others for good or evil! They get drawn in somehow, and end by paying the same penalty as those that meant nothing else from the start.

The finish of the whole thing was this, that we made up our minds to turn out in the bushranging line. It might seem foolish enough to outsiders, but when you come to think of it we couldn't better ourselves much. We could do no worse than we had done, nor run any greater risk to speak of. We were "long sentence men" as it was, sure of years and years in prison; and, besides, we were certain of something extra for breaking goal. Jim and Warrigal were "wanted," and might be arrested by any chance trooper who could recollect their description in the *Police Gazette*. Father might be arrested on suspicion and remanded again and again until they could get some evidence against him for lots of things that he'd been in besides the Momberah cattle. When it was all boiled down it came to this, that we could make more money in one night by sticking up a coach or a bank than in any other way in a year. That when we had done it, we were no worse off than we were now, as far as being outlaws, and there was a chance—not a very grand one, but still a chance—that we might find a way to clear out of New South Wales altogether.

So we settled it at that. We had plenty of good horses—what with the young ones coming on, that Warrigal could break, and what we had already. There was no fear of running short of horseflesh. Firearms we had enough for a dozen men. They were easy enough to come by. We knew that by every mail-coach that travelled on the Southern or Western line there was always a pretty fair sprinkling of notes sent in the letters, besides what the passengers might carry with them, watches, rings, and other valuables. It wasn't the habit of people to carry arms, and if they did, there isn't one in ten that uses 'em. It's all very well to talk over a dinner-table, but anyone who's been stuck up himself knows that there's not much chance of doing much in the resisting line.

Suppose you're in a coach, or riding along a road. Well, you're expected and waited for, and the road party knows the very moment you'll turn up. They see you a-coming. You don't see them till it's too late. There's a log or something across the road, if it's a coach, or else the driver's walking his horses up a steepish hill. Just at the worst pinch or at a turn, someone sings out "Bail up." The coachman sees a strange man in front, or close alongside of him, with a revolver pointed straight at him. He naturally don't like to be shot, and he pulls up. There's another man covering the passengers in the body of the coach, and he says if any man stirs or lifts a finger he'll give him no second chance. Just behind, on the other side, there's another man—perhaps two. Well, what's anyone, if he's ever so game, to do? If he tries to draw a weapon, or move ever so little, he's rapped at that second. He can only shoot one man, even if his aim is good, which it's not likely to be. What is more

the other passengers don't thank him—quite the contrary —for drawing the fire on them. I have known men take away a fellow's revolver lest he should get them all into trouble. That was a queer start, wasn't it? Actually preventing a man from resisting. They were quite right, though; he could only have done mischief and made it harder for himself and everyone else. If the passengers were armed, and all steady and game to stand a flutter, something might be done, but you don't get a coachload like that very often. So it's found better in a general way to give up what they have quietly and make no fuss about it. I've known cases where a single bushranger was rushed by a couple of determined men, but that was because the chap was careless, and they were very active and smart. He let them stand too near him. They had him, simple enough, and he was hanged for his carelessness; but when there's three or four men, all armed and steady, it's no use trying the rush dodge with them.

Of course there were other things to think about: what we were to do with the trinkets and bank-notes and things when we got them—how to pass them, and so on. There was no great bother about that. Besides Jonathan Barnes and chaps of his sort, dad knew a few "fences" that had worked for him before. Of course we had to suffer a bit in value. These sort of men make you pay through the nose for everything they do for you. But we could stand that out of our profits, and we could stick to whatever was easy to pass and some of the smaller things that were light to carry about. Men that make £300 or £400 of a night can afford to pay for accommodation.

The big houses in the bush, too. Nothing's easier

than to stick up one of them—lots of valuable things, besides money, often kept there, and it's ten to one against anyone being on the look-out when the boys come. A man hears they're in the neighbourhood, and keeps a watch for a week or two. But he can't be always waiting at home all day long with double-barrelled guns, and all his young fellows and the overseer that ought to be at their work among their cattle or sheep on the run idling their time away. No, he soon gets sick of that, and either sends his family away to town till the danger's past, or he "chances it," as people do about a good many things in the country. Then some fine day, about eleven or twelve o'clock, or just before tea, or before they've gone to bed, the dogs bark, and three or four chaps seem to have got into the place without anybody noticing 'em, the master of the house finds all the revolvers looking his way, and the thing's done. The house is cleared out of everything valuable, though nobody's harmed or frightened—in a general way, that is—a couple of the best horses are taken out of the stable, and the next morning there's another flaring article in the local paper. A good many men tried all they knew to be prepared and have a show for it; but there was only one that ever managed to come out right.

We didn't mean to turn out all in a minute. We'd had a rough time of it lately, and we wanted to wait and take it easy in the Hollow and close about for a month or so before we began business.

Starlight and I wanted to let our beards grow. People without any hair on their faces are hardly ever seen in the country now, except they've been in gaol lately, and of course we should have been marked men.

We saw no reason why we shouldn't take it easy.

Starlight was none too strong, though he wouldn't own it; he wouldn't have fainted as he did if he had. He wanted good keep and rest for a month, and so did I. Now that it was all over I felt different from what I used to do, only half the man I once was. If we stayed in the Hollow for a month the police might think we'd gone straight out of the country and slack off a bit. Anyhow, as long as they didn't hit the trail off to the entrance, we couldn't be in a safer place, and though there didn't seem much to do we thought we'd manage to hang it out somehow. One day we were riding all together in the afternoon, when we happened to come near the gully where Jim and I had gone up and seen the Hermit's Hut, as we had christened it. Often we had talked about it since; wondered about the man who had lived in it, and what his life had been.

This time we'd had all the horses in and were doing a bit of colt-breaking. Warrigal and Jim were both on young horses that had only been ridden once before, and we had come out to give them a hand.

"Do you know anything about that hut in the gully?" I asked Starlight.

"Oh, yes, all there is to know about it; and that's not much. Warrigal told me that, while the first gang that discovered this desirable country residence were in possession, a stranger accidentally found out the way in. At first they were for putting him to death, but on his explaining that he only wanted a solitary home, and should neither trouble not betray them, they agreed to let him stay. He was 'a big one gentleman,' Warrigal said; but he built the hut himself, with occasional help from the men. He was liberal with his gold, of which he had a small store, while it lasted. He lived here

many years, and was buried under a big peach tree that he had planted himself."

"A queer start, to come and live and die here; and about the strangest place to pick for a home I ever saw."

"There's a good many strange people in the colony, Dick, my boy," says Starlight, "and the longer you live the more you'll find of them. Some day, when we've got quiet horses, we'll come up and have a regular overhauling of the spot. It's years since I've been there."

"Suppose he turned out some big swell from the old country? Dad says there used to be a few in the old days, in the colony. He might have left papers and things behind him that might turn to good account."

"Whatever he did leave was hidden away. Warrigal says he was a little chap when he died, but he says he remembers men making a great coroboree over him when he died, and they could find nothing. They always thought he had money, and he showed them one or two small lumps of gold, and what he said was gold-dust washed out from the creek bed."

As we had no call to work now, we went in for a bit of sport every day. Lord! how long it seemed since Jim and I had put the guns on our shoulders and walked out in the beautiful fresh part of the morning to have a day's shooting. It made us feel like boys again. When I said so the tears came into Jim's eyes and he turned his head away. Father came one day; he and old Crib were a stunning pair for pot shooting, and he was a dead game shot, though we could be at him with the rifle and revolver.

There was a pretty fair show of game too. The lowan (Mallee hen they're mostly called) and tallagatta (brush *turkey*) were thick enough in some of the scrubby corners.

Warrigal used to get the lowan eggs—beautiful pink thin-shelled ones they are, first-rate to eat, and one of 'em a man's breakfast. Then there were pigeons, wild ducks, quail, snipe now and then, besides wallaby and other kangaroos. There was no fear of starving, even if we hadn't a tidy herd of cattle to come upon.

The fishing wasn't bad either. The creeks ran towards the north-west watershed and were full of codfish, bream, and perch. Even the jewfish wasn't bad with their skins off. They all tasted pretty good, I tell you, after a quick broil, let alone the fun of catching them. Warrigal used to make nets out of cooramin bark, and put little weirs across the shallow places, so as we could go in and drive the fish in. Many a fine cod we took that way. He knew all the blacks' ways as well as a good many of ours. The worst of him was that except in hunting, fishing, and riding he'd picked up the wrong end of the habits of both sides. Father used to set snares for the brush kangaroo and the bandicoots, like he'd been used to do for the hares in the old country. We could always manage to have some kind of game hanging up. It kept us amused too.

But I don't know whatever we should have done, that month we stayed there, at the first—we were never so long idle again—without the horses. We used to muster them twice a week, run 'em up into the big receiving yard, and have a regular good look over 'em till we knew every one of 'em like a book.

Some of 'em was worth looking at, my word! "D'ye see that big upstanding three-year-old dark bay filly, with a crooked streak down her face," Starlight would say, "and no brand but your father's on? Do you know her name? That's young Termagant, a daughter of Mr. Rous-

cival's racing mare of the same name that was
week before she was born, and her dam was ne
alive again. Pity to kill a mare like that, wasn't
sire was Repeater, the horse that ran the two th
heats with Mackworth, in grand time, too." The
"That chestnut colt with the white legs would b
five hundred all out if we could sell him with l
name and breeding, instead of having to do w
pedigree. We shall be lucky if we get a hundr
for him. The black filly with the star—yes, sh
roughbred too, and couldn't have been bought for
Only a month old and unbranded, of course, wh
father and Warrigal managed to bone the old ma
Gibson offered £50 reward, or £100 on co
Wasn't he wild! That big bay horse, Warrior,
training for a steeplechase when I took him out
King's stable. I rode him 120 miles before
day. Those two browns are Mr. White's famou
horses. He thought no man could get the better
But your old father was too clever. I believe h
shake the devil's own four-in-hand—(coal blac
manes and tails touching the ground, and eyes
some German fellow says they are)—and the P
Darkness never be the wiser. The pull of it is th
they're in here they're never heard of again till i
to shift them to another colony, or clear them
let the buyer take his chance."

"You've some plums here," I said. "Even th
look pretty well bred."

"Always go for pedigree stock, Fifteenth Du
withstanding. They take no more keep than roug
and they're always saleable. That red shorthor
belongs to the Butterfly Red Rose tribe; she was

30 miles in front of a man's saddle the day she was calved. We suckled her on an old brindle cow; she doesn't look the worse for it. Isn't she a beauty? We ought to go in for an annual sale here. How do you think it would pay?"

All this was pleasant enough, but it couldn't last for ever. After the first week's rest, which was real pleasure and enjoyment, we began to find the life too dull and dozy. We'd had quite enough of a quiet life, and began to long for a bit of work and danger again. Chaps that have got something on their minds can't stand idleness, it plays the bear with them. I've always found they get thinking and thinking till they get a low fit like, and then if there's any grog handy they try to screw themselves up with that. It gives them a lift for a time, but afterwards they have to pay for it over and over again. That's where the drinking habit comes in—they can't help it—they must drink. If you'll take the trouble to watch men (and women too) that have been "in trouble" you'll find that 19 out of every 20 drink like fishes when they get the chance. It ain't the love of the liquor, as teetotalers and those kind of goody people always are ramming down your throat—it's the love of nothing. But it's the fear of their own thoughts—the dreadful misery—the anxiety about what's to come, that's always hanging like a black cloud over their heads. That's what they can't stand; and liquor, for a bit, mind you—say a few hours or so—takes all that kind of feeling clean away. Of course it returns, harder than before, but that says nothing. It *can* be driven away. All the heavy-heartedness which a man feels, but never puts into words, flies away with the first or second glass of grog. If a man was suffering pains of any kind, or was being

stretched on the rack (I never knew what a rack was till I'd time for reading in gaol, except a horse-rack), or was being flogged, and a glass of anything he could swallow would make him think he was on a feather-bed enjoying a pleasant doze, wouldn't he swig it off, do you think? And suppose there are times when a man feels as if hell couldn't be much worse than what he's feeling all the long day through—and I tell you there are—I, who have often stood it hour after hour—won't he drink then? And why shouldn't he?

We began to find that towards the end of the day we all of us found the way to father's brandy keg—that by nightfall the whole lot of us had quite as much as we could stagger under. I don't say we regularly went in for drinking; but we began to want it by 12 o'clock every day, and to keep things going after that till bed-time. In the morning we felt nervous and miserable; on the whole we weren't very gay till the sun was over the foreyard.

Anyhow, we made it up to clear out and have the first go-in for a touch on the southern line the next week as ever was. Father was as eager for it as anybody. He couldn't content himself with this sort of Robinson Crusoe life any longer and said he must have a run and a bit of work of some sort or he'd go mad. This was on the Saturday night. Well, on Sunday we sent Warrigal out to meet one of our telegraphs at a place about 20 miles off, and to bring us any information he could pick up and a newspaper. He came back about sundown that evening, and told us that the police had been all over the country after us, and that Government had offered £200 reward for our apprehension—mine and Starlight's —*with* £50 each for Warrigal and Jim. They had an

idea we'd all shipped for America. He sent us a newspaper. There was some news; that is, news worth talking about. Here was what was printed in large letters on the outside:—

"WONDERFUL DISCOVERY OF GOLD AT THE TURON.

"We have much pleasure in informing our numerous constituents that gold, similar in character and value to that of San Francisco, has been discovered on the Turon River by those energetic and experienced practical miners, Messrs. Hargraves and party. The method of cradling is the same, the appliances required are simple and inexpensive, and the proportional yield of gold highly reassuring. It is impossible to forecast the results of this most momentous discovery. It will revolutionize the new world. It will liberate the old. It will precipitate Australia into a nation.

"Meanwhile numberless inconveniences, even privations, will arise—to be endured unflinchingly—to be borne in silence. But courage, England, we have hitherto achieved victory."

This news about the gold breaking out in such a place as the Turon made a great difference in our notions. We hardly knew what to think at first. The whole country seemed upside down. Warrigal used to sneak out from time to time, and come back open-mouthed, bringing us all sorts of news. Everybody, he said, was coming up from Sydney. There would be nobody left there but the Governor. What a queer start—the Governor sitting lonely in a silent Government House, in the middle of a deserted city! We found out that it was true after we'd made one or two short rides out ourselves.

Afterwards the police had a deal too much to do to think of us. We didn't run half the chance of being dropped on to that we used to do. The whole country was full of absconders and deserters, servants, shepherds, shopmen, soldiers, and sailors—all running away from their work, and making in a blind sort of way for the diggings, like a lot of caterpillars on the march.

We had more than half a notion about going there ourselves, but we turned it over in our minds, and thought it wouldn't do. We should be sure to be spotted anywhere in New South Wales. All the police stations had our descriptions posted up, with a reward in big letters on the door. Even if we were pretty lucky at the start we should always be expecting them to drop on us. As it was, we should have twenty times the chance among the coaches, that were sure to be loaded full up with men that all carried cash, more or less; you couldn't travel then in the country without it. We had twice the pull now, because so many strangers, that couldn't possibly be known to the police, were straggling over all the roads. There was no end of bustle and rush in every line of work and labour. Money was that plentiful that everybody seemed to be full of it. Gold began to be sent down in big lots, by the Escort, as it was called—sometimes ten thousand ounces at a time. That was money if you liked—forty thousand pounds!—enough to make one's mouth water—to make one think dad's prophecy about the ten thousand pounds wasn't so far out after all.

Just at the start most people had a kind of notion that the gold would only last a short time, and that things would be worse than before. But it lasted a deal *longer* than any of us expected. It was 1850 that I'm

talking about. It's getting on for 1860 now, and there seems more of it about than ever there was.

Most of our lives we'd been used to the southern road, and we kept to it still. It wasn't right in the line of the gold diggings, but it wasn't so far off. It was a queer start when the news got round about to the other colonies, after that to England, and I suppose all the other old world places, but they must have come by shiploads, the road was that full of new chums—we could tell 'em easy by their dress, their fresh faces, their way of talk, their thick sticks, and new guns and pistols. Some of them you'd see dragging a handcart with another chap, and they having all their goods, tools, and clothes on it. Then there'd be a dozen men, with a horse and cart, and all their swags in it. If the horse jibbed at all, or stuck in the deep ruts—and wasn't it a wet season?—they'd give a shout and a rush, and tear out cart and horse and everything else. They told us that there were rows of ships in Sydney harbour without a soul to take care of them; that the soldiers were running away to the diggings just as much as the sailors; clergymen and doctors, old hands and new chums, merchants and lawyers. They all seemed as if they couldn't keep away from the diggings that first year for their lives.

All stock went up double and treble what they were before. Cattle and sheep we didn't mind about. We could do without them now. But the horse market rose wonderfully, and that made a deal of odds to us, you may be sure.

It was this way. Every man that had a few pounds wanted a horse to ride or drive; every miner wanted a washdirt cart and a horse to draw it. The farmer wanted

working horses, for wasn't hay sixty or seventy pounds a ton, and corn what you liked to ask for it? Every kind of harness horse was worth forty, fifty, a hundred pounds apiece, and only to ask it; some of 'em weedy and bad enough, Heaven knows. So between the horse trade and the road trade we could see a fortune sticking out, ready for us to catch hold of whenever we were ready to collar.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Our first try-on in the coach line was with the Goulburn mail. We knew the road pretty well, and picked out a place where they had to go slow and couldn't get off the road on either side. There's always places like that in a coach road near the coast, if you look sharp and lay it out beforehand. This wasn't on the track to the diggings, but we meant to leave that alone till we got our hand in a bit. There was a lot of money flying about the country in a general way where there was no sign of gold. All the storekeepers began to get up fresh goods, and to send money in notes and cheques to pay for them. The price of stock kept dealers and fat cattle buyers moving, who had their pockets full of notes as often as not.

Just as you got nearly through Bargo Brush on the old road there was a stiffish hill that the coach passengers mostly walked up, to save the horses—fenced in, too, with a nearly new three-rail fence, all ironbark, and not the sort of thing that you could ride or drive over handy. We thought this would be as good a place as we could pick, so we laid out the whole thing as careful as we could beforehand.

The three of us started out from the Hollow as soon

as we could see in the morning; a Friday it was, I remember it pretty well—good reason I had, too. Father and Warrigal went up the night before with the horses we were to ride. They camped about twenty miles on the line we were going, at a place where there was good feed and water, but well out of the way and on a lonely road. There had been an old sheep station there and a hut, but the old man had been murdered by the hut-keeper for some money he had saved, and a story got up that it was haunted by his ghost. It was known as the "Murdering Hut," and no shepherd would ever live there after, so it was deserted. We weren't afraid of shepherds alive or dead, so it came in handy for us, as there was water and feed in an old lambing paddock. Besides, the road to it was nearly all a lot of rock and scrub from the Hollow, that made it an unlikely place to be tracked from.

Our dodge was to take three quiet horses from the Hollow and ride them there, first thing; then pick up our own three—Rainbow and two other out-and-outers—and ride bang across the southern road. When things were over we were to start straight back to the Hollow. We reckoned to be safe there before the police had time to know which way we'd made.

It all fitted in first rate. We cracked on for the Hollow in the morning early, and found dad and Warrigal all ready for us. The horses were in great buckle, and carried us over to Bargo easy enough before dark. We camped about a mile away from the road, in as thick a place as we could find, where we made ourselves as snug as things would allow. We had brought some grub with us and a bottle of grog, half of which we finished before we started out to spend the evening. We hobbled

the horses out and let them have an hour's picking. They were likely to want all they could get before they saw the Hollow again.

It was near twelve o'clock when we mounted. Starlight said—

"By Jove, boys, it's a pity we didn't belong to a troop of irregular horse instead of this rotten colonial Dick Turpin business, that one can't help being ashamed of. Hodson or Jacob would have been delighted to have recruited the three of us, as we ride, and our horses are worth best part of ten thousand rupees. What a tent-pegger Rainbow would have made, eh, old boy?" he said, patting the horse's neck. "But Fate won't have it, and it's no use whining."

The coach was to pass half an-hour after midnight. An awful long time to wait, it seemed. We finished the bottle of brandy, I know. I thought they never would come, when all of a sudden we saw the lamp.

Up the hill they came slow enough. About half-way up they stopped, and most of the passengers got out and walked up after her. As they came closer to us we could hear them laughing and talking and skylarking, like a lot of boys. They didn't think who was listening. "You won't be so jolly in a minute or two," I thinks to myself.

They were near the top when Starlight sings out, "Stand! Bail up!" and the three of us, all masked, showed ourselves. You never saw a man look so scared as the passenger on the box-seat, a stout, jolly commercial, who'd been giving the coachman Havana cigars, and yarning and nipping with him at every house they passed. Bill Webster, the driver, pulls up all standing when he sees what was in Starlight's hand, and holds

the reins so loose for a minute I thought they'd drop out of his hands. I went up to the coach. There was no one inside—only an old woman and a young one. They seemed struck all of a heap, and couldn't hardly speak for fright.

The best of the joke was that the passengers started running up full split to warm themselves, and came bump against the coach before they found out what was up. One of them had just opened out for a bit of blowing. "Billy, old man," he says, "I'll report you to the Company if you crawl along this way," when he catches sight of me and Starlight, standing still and silent, with our revolvers pointing his way. By George! I could hardly help laughing. His jaw dropped, and he couldn't get a word out. His throat seemed quite dry.

"Now, gentlemen," says Starlight, quite cool and cheerful-like, "you understand Her Majesty's mail is stuck up, to use a vulgar expression, and there's no use resisting. I must ask you to stand in a row there by the fence, and hand out all the loose cash, watches, or rings you may have about you. Don't move; don't, I say, sir, or I must fire." (This was to a fidgety, nervous man who couldn't keep quiet.) "Now, Number One, fetch down the mail bags; Number Two, close up here."

Here Jim walked up, revolver in hand, and Starlight begins at the first man, very stern—

"Hand out your cash; keep back nothing, if you value your life."

You never saw a man in such a funk. He was a storekeeper, we found afterwards. He nearly dropped on his knees. Then he handed Starlight a bundle of notes, a gold watch, and took a handsome diamond ring from his finger. This Starlight put into his pocket. He

handed the notes and watch to Jim, who had a leather bag ready for them. The man sank down on the ground; he had fainted.

He was left to pick himself up. No. 2 was told to shell out. They all had something. Some had sovereigns, some had notes and small cheques, which are as good in a country place. The squatters draw too many to know the numbers of half that are out, so there's no great chance of their being stopped. There were eighteen male passengers, besides the chap on the box-seat. We made him come down. By the time we'd got through them all it was best part of an hour.

I pulled the mail bags through the fence and put them under a tree. Then Starlight went to the coach where the two women were. He took off his hat and bowed.

"Unpleasant necessity, madam, most painful to my feelings altogether, I assure you. I must really ask you —ah—is the young lady your daughter, madam?"

"Not at all," says the oldest, stout, middle-aged woman; "I never set eyes on her before."

"Indeed, madam," says Starlight, bowing again; "excuse my curiosity, I am desolated, I assure you, but may I trouble you for your watches and purses?"

"As you're a gentleman," said the fat lady, "I fully expected you'd have let us off. I'm Mrs. Buxter, of Bobbrawobbra."

"Indeed! I have no words to express my regret," says Starlight; "but, my dear lady, hard necessity compels me. Thanks, very much," he said to the young girl.

She handed over a small old Geneva watch and a little purse. The plump lady had a gold watch with a chain and purse to match.

"Is that all?" says he, trying to speak stern.

"It's my very all," says the girl, "£5. Mother gave me her watch, and I shall have no money to take me to Bowning, where I am going to a situation."

Her lips shook and trembled and the tears came into her eyes.

Starlight carefully handed Mrs. Buxter's watch and purse to Jim. I saw him turn round and open the other purse, and he put something in, if I didn't mistake. Then he looked in again.

"I'm afraid I'm rather impertinent," says he, "but your face, Miss—ah—Elmsdale, thanks—reminds me of someone in another world—the one I once lived in. Allow me to enjoy the souvenir and to return your effects. No thanks; that smile is ample payment. Ladies, I wish you a pleasant journey."

He bowed. Mrs. Buxter did not smile, but looked cross enough at the young lady, who, poor thing, seemed pretty full up and inclined to cry at the surprise.

"Now then, all aboard," sings out Starlight; "get in, gentlemen, our business matters are concluded for the night. Better luck next time. William, you had better drive on. Send back from the next stage, and you will find the mail bags under that tree. They shall not be injured more than can be helped. Good-night!"

The driver gathered up his reins and shouted to his team, that was pretty fresh after their spell, and went off like a shot. We sat down by the roadside with one of the coach lamps that we had boned and went through all the letters, putting them back after we'd opened them, and popping all notes, cheques, and bills into Jim's leather sack. We did not waste more time over our letter-sorting than we could help, you bet; but we were pretty

well paid for it—better than the post-office clerks are, by all accounts. We left all the mail bags in a heap under the tree, as Starlight had told the driver; and then, mounting our horses, rode as hard as we could lick to where dad and Warrigal were camped.

When we overhauled the leather sack into which Jim had stowed all the notes and cheques we found that we'd done better than we expected, though we could see from the first it wasn't going to be a bad night's work. We had £370 in notes and gold, a biggish bag of silver, a lot of cheques—some of which would be sure to be paid—seven gold watches and a lot of silver ones, some pretty good. Mrs. Buxter's watch was a real beauty, with a stunning chain. Starlight said he should like to keep it himself, and then I knew Bella Barnes was in for a present. Starlight was one of those chaps that never forgot any kind of promise he'd once made. Once he said a thing it would be done as sure as death—if he was alive to do it; and many a time I've known him take the greatest lot of trouble, no matter how pushed he might be, to carry out something which another man would have never troubled his head about.

We got safe to the Murdering Hut, and a precious hard ride it was, and tried our horses well, for, mind you, they'd been under saddle best part of twenty-four hours when we got back, and had done a good deal over a hundred miles. We made a short halt while the tea was boiling, then we all separated for fear a black tracker might have been loosed on our trail, and knowing well what bloodhounds they are sometimes.

Warrigal and Starlight went off together as usual; they were pretty safe to be out of harm's way. Father made off on a line of his own. We took the two horses

we'd ridden out of the Hollow, and made for that place the shortest way we knew. We could afford to hit out—horseflesh was cheap to us—but not to go slow. Time was more than money to us now—it was blood, or next thing to it.

"I'll go anywhere you like," says Jim, stretching himself. "It makes no odds to me now where we go. What do you think of it, dad?"

"I think you've no call to leave here for another month anyhow; but as I suppose some folks'll play the fool some road or other you may as well go there as anywhere else. If you must go you'd better take some of these young horses with you and sell them while prices keep up."

"Capital idea," says Starlight; "I was wondering how we'd get those colts off. You've the best head amongst us, governor. We'll start out to-day and muster the horses, and we can take Warrigal with us as far as Jonathan Barnes's place."

We didn't lose time once we'd made up our minds to anything. So that night all the horses were in and drafted ready—twenty-five upstanding colts, well bred, and in good condition. We expected they'd fetch a lot of money. They were all quiet, too, and well broken in by Warrigal, who used to get so much a head extra for this sort of work, and liked it. He could do more with a horse than any man I ever saw. They never seemed to play up with him as young horses do with other people. Jim and I could ride 'em easy enough when they was tackled, but for handling and catching and getting round them we couldn't hold a candle to Warrigal.

The next thing was to settle how to work it when we got to the diggings. We knew the auctioneers there and

everywhere else would sell a lot of likely stock and ask no questions; but there had been such a lot of horse-stealing since the diggings broke out that a law had been passed on purpose to check it. In this way: If any auctioneer sold a stolen horse and the owner claimed it before six months the auctioneer was held liable. He had to return the horse and stand the loss. But they found a way to make themselves right. Men generally do if a law's over sharp; they get round it somehow or other. So the auctioneers made it up among themselves to charge ten per cent. on the price of all horses that they sold, and make the buyer pay it. For every ten horses they sold they could afford to return one. The proof of an animal being stolen didn't turn up above once in fifty or a hundred times, so they could well afford the expense when it did.

It wasn't an easy thing to drive horses out of the Hollow, 'specially those that had been bred or reared there. But they were up to all that kind of thing, dad and Starlight. First there was a yard at the lower end of the gully that led up where we'd first seen Starlight come down, and a line of fence across the mountain walls on both sides, so that stock once in there couldn't turn back. Then they picked out a couple or three old mares that had been years and years in the Hollow, and been used to be taken up this track and knew their way back again. One they led up; dad went first with her, and another followed; then the colts took the track after them, as stock will. In half-an-hour we had them all up at the top, on the tableland, and ready to be driven anywhere. The first day we meant to get most of the way to Jonathan Barnes's place, and to stop there, and have *a bit* of a spell the second. We should want to spell

the horses and make 'em up a bit, as it was a longish drive over rough country to get there. Besides, we wanted all the information we could get about the diggings and other matters, and we knew Jonathan was just that open-mouthed, blatherskitin' sort of chap that would talk to everybody he saw, and hear mostly all that was going on.

A long, hard day was that first one. The colts tried to make back every now and then, or something would start them, and they'd make a regular stampede for four or five miles as hard as they could lay leg to ground. It wasn't easy to live with 'em across broken country, well-bred 'uns like them, as fast as racehorses for a short distance; but there were as good behind 'em, and Warrigal was pretty nearly always near the lead, doubling and twisting and wheeling 'em the first bit of open ground there was. He was A1 through timber, and no mistake. We got to a place father knew, where there was a yard, a little before dark; but we took care to watch them all night for fear of accidents. It wouldn't do to let 'em out of our sight about there. We should never have set eyes on 'em again, and we knew a trick worth two of that.

Next day, pretty early, we got to Barnes's, where we thought we should be welcome. It was all right. The old man laughed all over his face when he saw us, and the girls couldn't do enough for us when they heard we'd had scarce a morsel to eat or drink that day.

"Why, you're looking first-rate, Captain!" says Bella. "Dick, I hardly knowed ye—the mountain air seems to agree with you. Maddie and I thought you was never going to look in no more. Thought you'd clean forgot us—didn't we, Mad? Why, Dick, what a grand beard you've grown? I never thought you was so handsome before!"

"I promised you a trifling present when I was here last, didn't I, Bella?" says Starlight. "There." He handed her a small parcel carefully tied up. "It will serve to remind you of a friend."

"Oh, what a lovely, splendid, duck of a watch!" says the girl, tearing open the parcel. "And what a love of a chain! and lots of charms, too. Where, in all the world, did you get this? I suppose you didn't buy it in George Street."

"It *was* bought in George Street," says he; "and here's the receipt; you needn't be afraid of wearing it to church or anywhere else. Here's Mr. Flavelle's name, all straight and square. It's quite new, as you can see."

Jim and I stared. Dad was outside, seeing the horses fed, with Warrigal. We made sure at first it was Mrs. Buxter's watch and chain; but he knew better than to give the girl anything that she could be brought into trouble for wearing, if it was identified on her; so he'd sent the cash down to Sydney, and got the watch sent up to him by one of father's pals. It was as right as the bank, and nobody could touch it or her either. That was Starlight all over; he never seemed to care much for himself. As to anything he told a woman, she'd no call to trouble herself about whether it would be done or not.

"It'll be my turn next," says Maddie. "I can't afford to wait till—till—the Captain leaves me that beauty horse of his. It's too long. I might be married before that, and my old man cut up rough. Jim Marston, what are you going to give me? I haven't got any earrings worth looking at, except these gold hoops that everybody knows."

"All right," says Jim. "I'll give you and Bell a pair *each*, if you're good girls, when we sell the horses, un-

less we're nailed at the Turon. What sort of a shop is it? Are they getting much gold?"

"Digging it out like potatoes," says Bella; "so a young chap told us that come this way last week. My word! didn't he go on about the coach being stuck up. Mad and I nearly choked ourselves laughing. We made him tell it over twice. He said a friend of his was in it—in the coach, that is—and we could have told him friends of ours was in it too, couldn't we?"

"And what did he think of it all?"

"Oh, he was a new chum; hadn't been a year out. Not a bad cut of a young feller. He was awful shook on Mad; but she wouldn't look at him. He said if it was in England the whole countryside would rise up and hunt such scoundrels down like mad dogs; but in a colony like this people didn't seem to know right from wrong."

"Did he, indeed?" says Starlight. "Ingenuous youth! When he lives a little longer he'll find that people in England, and, indeed, everywhere else, are very much like they are here. They'll wink at a little robbery, or take a hand themselves if it's made worth their while. And what became of your English friend?"

"Oh! he said he was going on to Port Phillip. There's a big diggings broke out there too, he says; and he has some friends there, and he thinks he'll like that side better."

"I think we'd better cut the Sydney 'side,' too," says Starlight. "What do you say, Maddie? We'll be able to mix up with these new chum Englishmen and Americans that are coming here in swarms, and puzzle Sergeant Goring and his troopers more than ever."

"Oh! come, now! that would be mean," says Maddie. "I wouldn't be drove away from my own part of

the country, if I was a man, by anybody. I'd stay and fight it out. Goring was here the other day, and tried to pick out something from father and us about the lot of you."

"Ha!" says Starlight, his face growing dark, and different-looking about the eyes from what I'd ever seen him, "did he? He'd better beware. He may follow up my trail once too often. And what did you tell him?"

"We told him a lot of things," says the girl; "but I am afeared they was none of 'em true. He didn't get much out of us, nor wouldn't if he was to come once a week."

"I expect not," says Jim; "you girls are smart enough. There's no man in the police or out of it that 'll take much change out of you. I'm most afraid of your father, though, letting the cat out of the bag; he's such an old duffer to blow."

"He was nearly telling the sergeant he'd seen a better horse lately here than his famous chestnut Marlborough, only Bella trod on his toe, and told him the cows was in the wheat. Of course Goring would have dropped it was Rainbow, or some well-bred horse you chaps have been shaking lately."

"You're a regular pearl of discretion, my dear," says Starlight, "and it's a pity, like some other folks, you haven't a better field for the exercise of your talents. However, that's very often the way in this world, as you'll perhaps find out when you're old and ugly, and the knowledge can't do you any good. Tell us all you heard about the coach accident."

"My word! it was the greatest lark out," says Maddie. She'd twice the fun in her the other had, and was that good tempered nothing seemed to put her out,

"Everybody as come here seemed to have nothing else to talk about. Those that was going to the diggings, too, took it much easier than those that was coming away."

"How was that?"

"Well, the chaps that come away mostly have some gold. They showed us some pretty fair lumps and nuggets, I can tell you. They seemed awfully gallied about being stuck up and robbed of it, and they'd heard yarns of men being tied to trees in the bush and left there to die."

"Tell them for me, my fair Madeline, that Starlight and Company don't deal with single diggers; ours is a wholesale business—eh, Dick? We leave the retail robbery to meaner villains."

We had the horses that quiet by this time that we could drive them the rest of the way to the Turon by ourselves. We didn't want to be too big a mob at Barnes's house. Anyone might come in accidental, and it might get spread about. So after supper Warrigal was sent back; we didn't want his help any more, and he might draw attention. The way we were to take in the horses, and sell them, was all put up.

Jim and I were to drive them the rest of the way across the ranges to the Turon. Barnes was to put us on a track he knew that would take us in all right, and yet keep away from the regular highway. Starlight was to stay another day at Barnes's, keeping very quiet, and making believe, if anyone came, to be a gentleman from Port Phillip that wasn't very well. He'd come in and see the horses sold, but gammon to be a stranger, and never set eyes on us before.

"My word!" said Barnes, who just came in at the time, "you've made talk enough for all the countryside

with that mail coach racket of yours. Every man, woman, and child that looks in here's sure to say, 'Did you hear about the Goulburn mail being stuck up?' 'Well, I did hear something,' I says, and out it all comes. They wonder first whether the bushrangers will be caught; where they're gone to that the police can't get 'em; how it was that one of 'em was so kind to the young lady as to give her new watch back, and whether Captain Starlight was as handsome as people say, and if Mrs. Buxter will ever get her watch back with the big reward the Government offered. More than that, whether they'll stick up more coaches or fly the country."

"I'd like to have been there and see how Bill Webster looked," says Maddie. "He was here one day since, and kept gassin' about it all as if he wouldn't let none of you do only what he liked. I didn't think he was that game, and told him so. He said I'd better take a seat some day and see how I liked it. I asked him wasn't they all very good-looking chaps, and he said Starlight was genteel-lookin', but there was one great, big rough-lookin' feller—that was you, Jim—as was ugly enough to turn a cask of beer sour."

"I'll give him a hammerin' for that yet," grumbles old Jim. "My word, he was that shaky and blue-lookin' he didn't know whether I was white or black."

We had a great spree that night in a quiet way, and got all the fun as was to be had under the circumstances. Barnes came out with some pretty good wine which Starlight shouted for all round. The old woman cooked us a stunning good dinner, which we made the girls sit down to and some cousins of theirs that lived close by. We were merry enough before the evening was out. Bella Barnes played the piano middling, and Maddie could

sing first-rate, and all of them could dance. The last thing I recollect was Starlight showing Maddie what he called a minuet step, and Jonathan and the old woman sitting on the sofa as grave as owls.

Anyhow, we all enjoyed ourselves. It was a grand change after being so long alone. The girls romped and laughed and pretended to be offended every now and then, but we had a regular good lark of it, and didn't feel any the worse at daylight next morning.

Jim and I were away before sunrise, and after we'd once got on the road that Jonathan showed us we got on well enough. We were dressed just like common bushmen. There were plenty on the road just then bringing cattle and horses to the diggings. It was well known that high prices were going there and that everybody paid in cash. No credit was given, of course.

We had on blue serge shirts, moleskin trousers, and roughish leather gaiters that came up to the knee, with ponchos strapped on in front; inside them was a spare shirt or two; we had oldish felt hats, as if we'd come a good way. Our saddles and bridles were rusty-looking and worn; the horses were the only things that were a little too good, and might bring the police to suspect us. We had to think of a yarn about them. We looked just the same as a hundred other long-legged six-foot natives with our beards and hair pretty wild—neither better nor worse.

As soon as Starlight came on to the Turon he was to rig himself out as a regular swell, and gammon he'd just come out from England to look at the goldfields. He could do that part wonderfully well. We would have backed him to take in the devil himself, if he saw him, let alone goldfields police, if Sergeant Goring wasn't about.

The second day Jim and I were driving quietly and easy on the road, the colts trotting along as steady as old stock horses, and feeding a bit every now and then. We knew we were getting near the Turon, so many tracks came in from all parts, and all went one way. All of a sudden we heard a low rumbling, roaring noise, something like the tide coming in on the sea shore.

"I say, Jim, old man, we haven't made any mistake —crossed over the main range and got back to the coast, have we?"

"Not likely," he said; but what the deuce is that row? I can't reckon it up for the life of me."

I studied and studied. On it went grinding and rattling like all the round pebbles in the world rolling on a beach with a tidy surf on. I tumbled at last.

"Remember that thing with the two rockers we saw at the hermit's hut in the Hollow?" I said to Jim. "We couldn't make out what it was. I know now; it was a gold cradle, and there's hundreds and thousands rocking there at the Turon. That's what's the matter."

"We're going to see some life, it strikes me," says he. "We'll know it all directly. But the first thing we've got to do is to shut these young 'uns up safe in the sale-yard. Then we can knock round this town in comfort."

We went outside of a rocky point, and sure enough here was the first Australian gold diggings in full blast. What a sight it was to be sure! Jim and I sat in our saddles while the horses went to work on the green grass of the flat, and stared as if we'd seen a bit of another world. So it was another world to us, straight away from the sad-voiced solitudes of the bush.

Barring Sydney or Melbourne, we'd never seen so

many men in a crowd before; and how different they looked from the crawling people of a town! A green-banked rapid river ran before us, through a deep narrow valley. The bright green flats looked so strange with the yellow water rippling and rushing between them. Upon that small flat, and by the bank, and in the river itself, nearly 20,000 men were at work, harder and more silently than any crowd we'd ever seen before. Most of 'em were digging, winding up greenhide buckets filled with gravel from shafts, which were sunk so thickly all over the place that you could not pass between without jostling someone. Others were driving carts heavily laden with the same stuff towards the river, in which hundreds of men where standing up to their waists washing the gold out of tin pans, iron buckets, and every kind of vessel or utensil. By far the greater number of miners used things like child's cradles, rocking them to and fro while a constant stream of yellow water passed through. Very little talk went on; every man looked feverishly anxious to get the greatest quantity of work done by sundown.

Foot police and mounted troopers passed through the crowd every now and then, but there was apparently no use or no need for them; that time was to come. Now and then someone would come walking up, carrying a knapsack, not a swag, and showing by his round, rosy face that he hadn't seen a summer's sun in Australia. We saw a trooper riding towards us, and, knowing it was best to take the bull by the horns, I pushed over to him, and asked if he could direct us to where Mr. Stevenson's, the auctioneer's, yard was.

"Whose horses are these?" he said looking at the brands. "B.M., isn't it?"

"Bernard Muldoon, Lower Macquarie," I answered. "There's a friend of his, a new chum, in charge; he'll be here to-morrow."

"Go on down Main Street [the first street in a diggings is always called Main Street] as you're going," he said, carelessly, giving us all a parting look through, "and take the first lane to the right. It takes you to the yard. It's sale-day to-morrow; you're in luck."

It was rather sharp work getting the colts through men, women, and children, carts, cradles, shafts, and tin dishes; but they were a trifle tired and tender-footed, so in less than twenty minutes they were all inside of a high yard, where they could scarcely see over the cap, with a row of loose boxes and stalls behind. We put 'em into Joe Stevenson's hands to sell—that was what everyone called the auctioneer—and walked down the long street.

My word, we were stunned, and no mistake about it. There was nothing to see but a rocky river and a flat, deep down between hills like we'd seen scores of times all our lives and thought nothing of, and here they were digging gold out of it in all directions, just like potatoes, as Maddie Barnes said. Some of the lumps we saw—nuggets they called 'em—was near as big as new potatoes, without a word of a lie in it. I couldn't hardly believe it; but I saw them passing the little washleather bags of gold dust and lumps of dirty yellow gravel, but heavier, from one to the other just as if they were nothing—nearly £4 an ounce they said it was all worth, or a trifle under. It licked me to think it had been hid away all the time, and not even the blacks found it out. I believe our blacks are the stupidest, laziest beggars in the whole world. That old man who lived and died in *the* Hollow, though—*he* must have known about it; and

the queer-looking thing with the rockers we saw near his hut, that was the first cradle ever was made in Australia.

The big man of the goldfield seemed to be the Commissioner. We saw him come riding down the street with a couple of troopers after his heels, looking as if all the place, and the gold, too, belonged to him. He had to settle all the rows and disputes that came up over the gold, and the boundaries of the claims, as they called the twenty-foot paddocks they all washed in, and a nice time he must have had of it! However, he was pretty smart and quick about it. The diggers used to crowd round and kick up a bit of a row sometimes when two lots of men were fighting for the same claim and gold coming up close by; but what he said was law, and no mistake. When he gave it out they had to take it and be content. Then he used to ride away and not trouble his head any more about it; and after a bit of barneying it all seemed to come right. Men liked to be talked to straight, and no shilly-shally.

What I didn't like so much was the hunting about of the poor devils that had not got what they called a license—a printed thing giving 'em leave for to dig gold on the Crown lands. This used to cost a pound or thirty shillings a month—I forget rightly which—and, of course, some of the chaps hadn't the money to get it with—spent what they had, been unlucky, or run away from somewhere, and come up as bare of everything to get it out of the ground.

You'd see the troopers asking everybody for licenses, and those that hadn't them would be marched up to the police camp and chained to a big log, sometimes for days and days. The Government hadn't time to get up a lock-up, with cells and all the rest of it, so they had to

do the chain business. Some of these men had seen better days, and felt it; the other diggers didn't like it either, and growled a good deal among themselves. We could see it would make bad blood some day; but there was such a lot of gold being got just then that people didn't bother their heads about anything more than they could help—plenty of gold, plenty of money, people bringing up more things every day from the towns for the use of the diggers. You could get pretty near anything you wanted by paying for it. Hard work from daylight to dark, with every now and then a big find to sweeten it, when a man could see as much money lying at his foot, or in his hand, as a year's work—no, nor five—hadn't made for him before. No wonder people were not in a hurry to call out for change in a place like the Turon in the year 1850!

The first night put the stuns on us. Long rows of tents, with big roaring log fires in front hot enough to roast you if you went too near; mobs of men talking, singing, chaffing, dealing—all as jolly as a lot of schoolboys. There was grog, too, going, as there is everywhere. No publics were allowed at first, so, of course, it was sold on the sly.

It's no use trying to make men do without grog, or the means of getting it; it never works. I don't hold with every shanty being licensed and its being under a man's nose all day long; but if he has the money to pay for it, and wants to have an extra glass of grog or two with his friends, or because he has other reasons, he ought to be able to get it without hardships being put in his way.

The Government was afraid of there being tremendous fights and riots at the diggings, because there was all

sorts of people there, English and French, Spaniards and Italians, natives and Americans, Greeks and Germans, Swedes and negroes, every sort and kind of man from every country in the world seemed to come after a bit. But they needn't have been frightened at the diggers. As far as we saw they were the sensiblest lot of working men we ever laid eyes on; not at all inclined to make a row for nothing—quite the other way. But the shutting off of public-houses led to sly grog tents, where they made the digger pay a pound a bottle for his grog, and didn't keep it very good either.

When the police found a sly grog tent they made short work of it, I will say. Jim and I were close by and saw them at the fun. Somebody had informed on the man, or they had some other reason; so they rode down, about a dozen troopers, with the Commissioner at their head. He went in and found two casks of brandy and one of rum, besides a lot of bottled stuff. They didn't want that for their own use, he believed.

First he had the heads knocked in of the hogsheads; then all the bottled wine and spirits were unpacked and stowed in a cart, while the straw was put back in the tent. Then the men and women were ordered to come outside, and a trooper set fire to the straw. In five minutes the tent and everything in it was a mass of flame.

There was a big crowd gathered round outside. They began to groan when the trooper lit the straw, but they did nothing, and went quietly home after a bit. We had the horses to see after next day. Just before the sale began, at 12 o'clock, and a goodish crowd had turned up, Starlight rides quietly up, the finest picture of a new chum you ever set eyes on. Jim and I could hardly keep from bursting out laughing.

He had brought up a quiet cobby sort of stock horse from the Hollow, plain enough, but a wonder to go, particularly over broken country. Of course, it didn't do to bring Rainbow out for such work as this. For a wonder, he had a short tail. Well, he'd squared this cob's tail and hogged his mane so that he looked like another animal. He was pretty fat, too.

He was dressed up to the nines himself, and if we didn't expect him we wouldn't have known him from a crow. First of all, he had a thick rough suit of tweed clothing on, all the same colour, with a round felt hat. He had a bran new saddle and bridle, that hadn't got the yellow rubbed off them yet. He had an English hunting whip in his hand, and brown dogskin gloves. He had tan leather gaiters that buttoned up to his knees. He'd shaved his beard all but his moustache and a pair of short whiskers.

He had an eyeglass in his eye, which he let drop every now and then, putting it up when he wanted to look at anybody.

When he rode up to the yard everybody stared at him, and one or two of the diggers laughed and began to call out "Joe." Jim and I thought how sold some of them would have been if he turned on them and they'd found out who it was. However, he pushed up to the auctioneer, without looking out right or left, and drawled—

"May I—er—ask if you are Mr.—er—Joseph Stevenson?"

"I'm Joe Stevenson," says the auctioneer. "What can I do for you?"

"Oh!—a—here is a letter from my friend, Mr. Bernard Muldoon, of the Lower Macquarie—er—requesting you to sell these horses faw him; and—er—hand

ver the pwoceeds to—er—me—Mr. Augustus—Gwanby —aw!"

Stevenson read the letter, nodded his head, said, All right; I'll attend to it," and went on with the sale.

It didn't take long to sell our colts. There were ome draught stock to come afterwards, and Joe had a lay's work before him. But ours sold well. There had ot been anything like this for size, quality, and condiion. The Commissioner sent down and bought one. The nspector of Police was there, and bought one recomnended by Starlight. They fetched high prices, from ifty to eighty-five guineas, and they came to a fairish igure the lot.

When the last horse was sold, Starlight says, "I feel ersonally obliged to you, Mr.—aw—Stevenson—faw the ighly satisfactory manner in which you have conducted he sale, and I shall inform my friend, Mr. Muldoon, of he way you have sold his stock."

"Much obliged, sir," says Joe, touching his hat. 'Come inside and I'll give you the cheque."

"Quite unnecessary now," says Starlight; "but as I'm acting for a friend, it may be as well."

We saw him pocket the cheque, and ride slowly over to the bank, which was half-tent, half-bark hut.

We didn't think it safe to stay on the Turon an hour longer than we were forced to do. We had seen the diggings, and got a good notion of what the whole thing was like; sold the horses and got the money, that was he principal thing. Nothing for it now but to get back o the Hollow. Something would be sure to be said bout the horses being sold, and when it came out that hey were not Muldoon's there would be a great flare-up. Still they could not prove that the horses were stolen.

There wasn't a wrong brand or a faked one in th
And no one could swear to a single head of them, t
the whole lot were come by on the cross, and father
have told who owned every one among them. Tha
curious, wasn't it?

We put in a night at Jonathan Barnes's on ou
back. Maddie got the earrings, and Bella the m
of a new riding habit, which she had been wantin
talking about for a good while. Starlight dresse
and did the new chum young Englishman, eyeglas
all, over again, and repeated the conversation h
with the Inspector of Police about his friend Mr.
doon's illness, and the colts he recommended. I
grand, and the girls laughed till they cried again.
those were merry days; we *did* have a bit of fun
times, and if the devil was dogging us he kept a
way out of sight. It's his way at the start when f
take the downward track.

* * * * *

We got back safe enough, and father opened hi
when he saw the roll of notes Starlight counted ou
the price of the colts. "Horse-breeding's our best g
says the old man, "if they're going to pay such
as this. I'm half a mind to start and take a lot o
Port Phillip. I believe they'd have fetched a hu
apiece there."

It was the old story. If we could have looked
a bit and had not had anything to do with those in
Momberah cattle, we should have been free to
tackled these diggings like everybody else, or gone
droving, butchering, or twenty other things that
making money hand over hand, and no danger or o
tion to any man.

There was George Storefield, old Slow-and-Sure as we used to call him, making no end of money by farming and carrying, and every now and then buying a farm, so that he'd have all the frontage to the creek and the richest part of the valley for miles directly.

We could each of us do a bigger day's work than George; he said so himself. We could write and cipher as well, we were as good at a bargain, and better at lots of things. Why was he steadily going up the tree and rising in life, in money, and standing, while we had gone down, and were going lower every day? Why, because he had stuck steadily to his work and been always square, always honest. We hadn't. This is what came of it.

As we didn't want to go away anywhere till the little excitement about the horses was over, we had to stay quiet for a spell, and amuse ourselves the best way we could in the Hollow. We were yarning about the diggings next morning, telling father what a row all the cradles made, when all of a sudden Jim says—

"Suppose we go and try to rout out something about that old hermit's hut. There was a cradle there, wasn't there? There's no doubt he'd been washing gold in the creek there years and years before these other chaps found it at the Turon. He might have planted a lot; there's no saying. Suppose we go and have a look to-day?"

"I don't mind," I said; "it will give us something to do. Did you ever hear of his having gold, father?"

"Only from Warrigal, and he didn't say much," says dad. "But from what he did let out the chaps that were here then thought they'd a show of coming in for some when he died, and were nearly going to burn the hut down when they didn't get anything. That's all I know."

Next day we started off early and took some grub

with us to camp out all night. We took a spade, a pick, and an axe. They'd be handy if we wanted to dig or be moving things. No horse, one gun, and some cartridges.

It had been raining a lot lately, but cleared up for a beautiful day. The grass looked splendid. When we came to the old hut it looked quite home-like. It was getting on for spring, the middle of October. The weather had been ever so cold and wet, but now the sun came out warm, and the days were getting longer. There was an almond tree near the old hut full of white flowers, and an early peach tree in bloom.

"I wonder if our almond tree's out yet in the Rocky Flat garden?" says Jim. I knew what he was thinking of.

We put our things inside the old hut, and began to make a regular search to see if we could find anything. We found letters cut here and there in the slabs. They'd been cut deep with a sharp knife, and plenty of time taken over the work. There were some short words, but they didn't seem to mean anything.

I looked at 'em over and over again, though Jim, who was always wanting to get to hard work, and never liked using his head when he could use his hands, said—

"What is the use of bothering over his scribblings and scratchings? Most likely the old cove was half cracked and meant nothing."

But it struck me different. He wasn't very mad for all I could see; only he had his reasons for living by himself, like us, only they were not likely to be the same as ours. He'd been sharp enough to search for gold and find some. He'd travelled in Mexico, or he wouldn't have known anything about a cradle. No; he wasn't very mad, and I was going to study over these letters on the *slabs,* and see if I could make anything out of them.

Jim said I was welcome, only he'd have up the hearth-:one—it was a tremendous big heavy slab of sandstone; e believed we'd find something under it. Anyhow, the ther fellows hadn't gone to the bother of having it up; : had never been stirred, we could see by the way the ouch grass had grown all around it.

So Jim set to work with the pick and spade, and very oon raised such a heap of dirt around about that he half illed up the room. I went on with the letters. I could ee here and there among all kinds of other scratchings, he letters "DDW," with the figures "68 y—s—" under-ieath, or near about somewhere.

"Now, what does this mean," I said to myself. "It neans something. See how deep it's cut here. He must iave been hours and hours over it."

"Mean?" says Jim, looking up from his work, "why, David Daniel West, or whatever his dashed old name was (confound him, there's twice as much of this stone inderneath as I thought for), and he was sixty-eight years old when he died. That's a lot to find out, ain't it?"

I'm pretty obstinate, worse luck, and don't like to be beat when I've once tackled a thing, so I wouldn't own to it.

"That's too easy a thing if that was all he meant. His name mightn't have been West, or anything like it. How was he to write sixty-eight years as his age when he died—years before he did die? They're too carefully :ut to be done when a man's making ready to die."

"I give it up," says Jim; "you take that and I'll take his; we'll see who comes out nearest to it. I'll find an ron chest full of gold and silver coins under this old tone."

Jim delved at great bat. At last he got to the bottom f the stone; it was only squared on top. The underneath

side was rough and three-cornered looking, and wedged into the ground. When he'd done this we got an old rail that was still sound—you can't lick ironbark—and prized the stone up. Then Jim and I cleared away the whole of the earth and shoved down the pick all over it.

We found it hit something hard in one corner. We set to with a will, and soon had the rest of the mould out. There was a row of short split-slabs, very solid, and hardly rotted at all. We weren't long lifting these, I can tell you. There was a small hollow place slabbed all round. These were on the top. Inside of this was a fair-sized sheet-iron box—not very solid and heavy—we had nothing to do but to lift it up. It was closed with a common lock, and the key was in it. It was rusty and wouldn't turn, but we got up the lid without any trouble to speak of. What did we see inside that iron box? Nothing but a lot of papers, a few old books written upon every day, half-a-dozen small canvas bags with minerals in them—not gold—and that was all.

We were disappointed.

"Well," says Jim, "of all the sells I ever was in or heard of, this beats. To think the old humbug should have been using the last days of his life in fixing up a swindle like this. I've half a mind to dig up his bones and bury them here. There's lots of room now."

"Better take home these papers and things and show them all to Starlight," I said. "He can read all kinds of writing better than us. He may as well have a run through these papers as read yellow books all day."

"All right," says Jim, quite good-natured again. It never lasted long with him. "It's too late to go home to-night, isn't it?"

"Yes," I said. "Boil the tea, and we'll have some-

thing to eat. You can go and have an afternoon's shooting. I'll stay here and worry out a little more."

"All right. I'll see if I can knock over one or two of these lowans and a black duck or so. I've had no shooting lately."

We had our dinner under a peach tree in the garden; and a pretty good one it was. We'd both got middlin' hungry, and felt ready for the corned beef and bread and tea. After this we had a smoke, and then Jim picks up his gun and slings away towards the foot of the mountain up the gully.

I laid down there smoking and considering for a solid hour after he left. There was thick green grass under the tree; indeed, all over the garden. It was like a carpet, and the sun had warmed it a bit. So I felt that comfortable, looking first at the pink peach blossoms close by and over to the dark looking mountain beyond, and then up to the bright blue sky, with the bit of a breeze and the sun warm, only not hot nor scorching, that I felt as if I could lay there and smoke and dream away for ever.

Then I got thinking over the letters on the wall, "DDW." Suppose they stood for something besides his name? It seemed such a slow thing to be always cutting out the letters of his own name. Why should he do that? The men in the valley, then, knew his name, or what he told them it was. What was the sense of always hammering away at the same thing?

Suppose it meant something else? What else did D stand for? Dirt, draw, done, din, dip, dig! Dig! yes, there was a meaning with some sense in. Of course he knew that if anyone dug in the hut the hearthstone would be the first one they'd root up. What then? We had dug and hadn't found much.

Then what did the other letters mean? D again. Then W—W—which, what, wool, water, work, well, west! West! how would that work out?

Dig D west. That could be understood, partly. D west, D west! Why not due west? I jumped up and threw up my hat, with a kind of schoolboy pleasure in finding out a riddle. Then came the number—"68 y—s—." That looked like the age of the dead man; he was always called as old when he died, father said; but I'd seen men no older than that that looked a hundred. Grief, hard living, and a rough life will put ten years on any man's life quick enough, you take my word for it.

Well, if it wasn't years, what was it?

"Dig due west—68 years." 68, 68, 68 YARDS. There it was clear as A B C, now it was found out.

Then dig due west 68 yards. Where was the distance to be measured from, and how was I to find due west? As I'd found out the meaning of the letters, perhaps I'd find that also. And what was there to bury?

I stepped sixty-eight yards, as near as I could measure, from the place where the iron box was, and made out due west from the sun, that was now getting low. This measurement led me pretty nigh to an old wild fig tree which must have been transplanted out of one of the brushes nigh the mountain. It had grown into a big spreading tree, and there was the remains of an old wooden seat under it, where I daresay the old man used to sit and think and look at the shadows creeping over the mountain walls at the end of the day. The ground had been well trod down all round, but of course had been grown over since.

"Well, I went poking all round this, under the branches of the tree, which spread out a great way, but I hadn't

made up my mind till just as the sun was going down; one of these last bits of sunshine struck right across and made a line from the chimney to the fig-tree trunk and straight out for a few yards. I marked the line carefully along, and had only time to do it when the sun went down, the valley began to turn dark and grow full of shadows. It was too late to tackle it that night. I heard Jim come whistling in, and knew by that he had shot something, so I went to meet him and put off digging till next morning.

CHAPTER XXV.

Jim, by all accounts, had a great afternoon's shooting, and was as pleased and contented as if there was nothing ahead that we need trouble about in the world. A little pleasure went a long way with poor old Jim. He was like mother in that way, when I recollect her before she found out all about father's cross work, and what might come of it.

In the regular old days of all she was always as happy as could be, working and singing away all day long, and thinking about nothing but her housework and her children, and hardly ever sitting down from morning to night. Even when father was away it seems she was that simple she never dropped down to his being at any kind of dishonest work that would bring him within the law. She knew he'd done it once in his life and suffered for it, but she believed all that was over and paid for. She never dreamt he'd taken to it again, worse than ever, and meant to stick to it to the end of his days.

I wasn't very big when I knew she'd found it all out, and I was sharp enough to see then what deal of dis-

ference it made in her ways. She'd often break off in the middle of her singing, and stop still and study and think till the tears would roll down her cheeks. Then she'd pick up Aileen, that was a little thing in those days, and kiss her and make much of her as if she couldn't leave off. Then she'd sit down and tell over her beads, and we'd hear her saying words we didn't understand. I don't hold with the Catholics myself, and I'm not likely to now; but if every man and woman followed up their religion like mother and Aileen did we shouldn't want many police in this country, and they might let gaols out for lodging-houses.

If mother had any sins to answer for, and I never saw nor heard tell of any, she paid for them in sorrow and fear and misery ten times over. If any people in the world could take the sin of others on their own souls, mother and Aileen did on theirs, and it ought to be put to their account when all these sort of things are settled up in another world, and everyone gets their cheque.

It seems Jim had shot two brace of black duck, a lowan, a wallaby (he brought home the tail), and half-a-dozen wonga-wonga pigeons. So he was pretty well loaded. We broiled a couple of pigeons for supper and picked a pair of ducks to last us to-morrow. The rest we could bring home. Starlight was awful fond of black duck, and always had them cooked with every care.

"You might just as well have good cooking and reasonable comfort as the other thing," he used to say. "Circumstances may have prevented us from being honest; that's no reason why we should be slovenly and barbarous in our habits as well."

So we had everything snug enough and orderly at the cave. There was plenty of room; every man had his

cabin and sleeping place to himself, partitioned off with slabs neatly enough. Dad was always a neat, tidy kind of man, so everything was kept ship-shape and man-of-war fashion. Our hut-keeping and cooking were a deal better than many a squatter had to put up with then.

Next morning at sunrise we turned to at the line I'd marked out, put in a trench outside, and worked in towards the old fig-tree.

We'd done a good two hours' work, when all of a sudden the ground got easy to dig, and we knew that it must have been moved before.

"Here we are, Dick," says Jim, after a bit, driving away with the pick like a good 'un and scooping out the soil. "There's something hard here, and no mistake."

The pick sounded again and again. What should it be but a big, rough-made wooden box, most like a sailor's, put together by a man who never served his time as a carpenter.

We were a good while before we could hoist it out. It wasn't like the other, full of papers, we could see. There were strong hide handles at each end, mouldy, but sound enough for us to lift its weight with. It was padlocked, but before I could make a try at opening the lock Jim smashed the staple with the axe and lifted the lid.

First there was a double fold of tarred canvas so as to keep away all moisture, and the places between the boards plugged with oakum and tarred, too. When we pulled up this we saw a number of canvas bags, very strongly stitched, and on each of them was marked "5lb." We opened the first bag, all carefully tied up it was, too, and sure enough it was all gold; some coarse, some fine, some with quartz, some with black sand, but all pure gold. The real thing, and no mistake. Gold!

We had seen too much of it at the diggings to be

mistaken, and we felt we knew enough in a general way to go digging on our own hook. All the bags were one weight, and filled in the same way. There were just ten of them. In one corner we found a brass-bound, very neat-worked writing desk; on the outside the letters "DDW." There was a small gold watch and chain, a lock of brown hair, and a few women's rings—one of them looked good—and a few other nicknacks.

Besides the gold there were a whole lot of other bags with bits of rough metal and things like that in them—that was what made the box so heavy—all labelled and marked very careful, but when we saw they weren't gold we didn't bother much about them. There wasn't anything else that looked likely, except the desk. It was light, but full of letters and papers, so we made up to bring it in to Starlight, or let him come out to see it, whichever suited best. We should find out by it the old man's real name, his reasons for living and dying in this lonely place, so far from everything and everybody in the world—in his world—and all his other secrets, if he had any. Some of them might be useful to us—some of them mightn't. Anyhow, we'd like to know all about him, and as he'd left us the gold, or as good, we felt as if we'd do anything for him that he might have left word about in his last days. But the gold. It wasn't a thing exactly to be left knocking about, even in the Hollow; so we took a bag each with us to show dad and the others, and covered up the big box again.

Of course we found ways and means to get the bags and afterwards the box and desk with the papers safe into the cave, when Starlight took a regular two or three days to overhaul them, and pick out those that he thought *we'd* care most to know about.

First of all he found out that his name was Dominick Devereux Wharton—the Honourable Mr. Wharton, too, a younger son of Lord Wharncombe's, of Wharncombe Abbey. He had married, seemingly, against the wishes of his family, and being very fond of travelling and botany and geology (that's what he had down in the paper, Starlight said), he made up his mind to come out to the unknown land of Australia, where he could hunt up new plants and strange birds and animals, and live away (he said) from people that despised his tastes as much as he despised their opinions. Starlight used to read all this out to us; some of it we caught the sense of, and part, of course, we didn't, being too learned and high-flown for the like of us. But we caught the hang of it in a general way, and thought what a flat he was if he liked moving about after rocks and plants better than taking it easy in his own country, and that country England. However, we knew other men, Jim said, that had been fools, and why not him? Besides, he had a wife that had followed him that he cared more for than anything under the sun ten times over. And he was fond of her, if ever a man was of a woman. Time after time Starlight read out bits where he talked about her as if there wasn't any other woman in the world, leastways, not for him. I suppose there's men that feel that way now and then. Women, I know, do; but it's mighty seldom that a man's wrapped up in his wife or any other woman—not that I've known about, and I've seen a good many, one way and another.

The Honourable Dominick Wharton wasn't much like other people, for he seemed to have been as happy as the day was long, when they lived in Sydney in a bit of a cottage by Double Bay, and when they went into the

bush and travelled about together, making sketches, collecting specimens, hunting about for minerals and stones, and rubbish of that kind, and she drying the plants and flowers, and putting labels on his bags, and never sparing herself in anything, only if she could please him. "The angels cannot be happier in heaven," is what he wrote down at the end of one of his day's work.

One thing he seemed particularly keen to find out was the gold and silver, of all things. He'd travelled in Mexico when he was a boy, and seen what he called "placer" mining, same as our shallow sinking, I expect. I watched how they washed it out of the alluvial in cradles. So, besides his plants, and stones, and bones, and wanting to know how old the world was, which he needn't have troubled his head about, he was always hunting and digging and washing about the creek and river beds, expecting to find gold, because he said the country was just like places where they always found gold and silver and other metals too.

But how did he come to the Hollow, and why did he live there so long and die there? That was what we wanted to know.

Then Starlight pulled out another parcel of paper, tied round with a black silk string, and begins to read. He looked different himself, and stopped chaffing and laughing, as we'd all been doing a bit, partly for nonsense, and partly not to seem too solemn-like.

"My wife is dead! dead! my adored, my only love, my true life, my soul! Why should I ever put pen to paper again? Why ever commit my vain thoughts and worthless words to a lasting record, when she who inspired every thought of my heart, every motion of my *mind,* every act of my being, lies dead! dead!—pulseless,

motionless for evermore! This wilderness—with her companionship, a Paradise replete with treasures of knowledge —seems now an Inferno, in which every tree sighs her death-note to the breeze—every plant, every flower, recalls her name. Estelle! lost Estelle, when shall I rejoin thee?

"She died in my arms. God was merciful, else might I have been afar. Despite the deadly reptile poison her senses were retained to the closing breath, until her last wishes found full expression. She gently reproved my despair, my wrath against fate, my defiance of heaven. Was I, the philosopher, the instructed student, the votary of science, to yield to blind, unreasoning despair—to blasphemous rage against that Providence which had granted us long years of happiness, ages of blissful companionship? No; I must not rave, nor weep, nor despair, if I wished my own Estelle to die happily and in peace. For her sake would I promise to carry out steadfastly, to complete, our original plan of scientific research? She adjured me by our lost love and hope—by this fast-fading sunset of all our hope and joy—by that dread day in which we should meet again. With such an object life would be endurable, and death not unwelcome. Would I swear?

"They smiled, how faintly sweet, those softest lips, those dying love-lit eyes, as I knelt by the rude couch and vowed to the Eternal Ruler of the Universe—to the heaven on the threshold of which she lay—by our immortal love—by that after life which spirits parted, but not divided, in time *must* share.

"Her stainless soul winged its flight from earth ere I rose well-nigh from a death-swoon, but pledged to carry out her dying wishes to the letter."

* * * * *

"Poor old chap," says Jim, taking his pipe out of his mouth, "that's enough to show why he took it into his head to turn hatter and live all by himself in the Hollow, which I expect never had an honest man camped upon it before or since. It's curious how things turn up. Did you ever see him, father?"

"No, not I. He was dead the year before Donohoe showed me the trick of getting in and out of this place. His mates both died a bit after. One got the horrors after drinking for a month straight on end, and pitched himself down that limestone place where the waterfall is. How the gin (Warrigal's mother) died, Donohoe wouldn't say. The other man was shot by the mounted police one day they had been sticking up one of old Bradley's drays. He got home pretty right, but died of it. Donohoe was getting old and done himself, and had to get a mate of some sort. He knew I was middlin' game, and could hold my tongue, even when I was drunk, so he took me. It's a long story how the Captain came among us; but he saved Warrigal's life when Donohoe had tied him up to a tree and was going to shoot him. That's why he takes to him more than anyone in the world. He's true to you, Captain, if he is to anyone, I believe."

Starlight didn't read any more to us just then. We looked over all the papers, and read and sorted 'em out next day. All the specimens and plants and letters and private papers he put away in the iron box, and fastened them up and locked them quite careful.

"These we'll send home to the poor old chap's relatives when we can get a chance, boys," he said. "I know something of the family. They lived in the same —well, near enough for me to know all about them. I remember hearing that one of the sons of old Lord

Wharncombe had sailed away to Australia with his wife when I was a boy, and never been heard of since. I never thought I should hear anything about him again."

The end of it all was that Starlight told us that he had learnt out of the letters and papers that Mr. Wharton and his wife, she being a clever, high-taught woman, had been very fond of the same kind of science work and all that as he was. More than that, she thought nothing a hardship, as other women would, as long as they were both together carrying out their learned ways and gathering in what they expected to make them both famous and run after when they got back to the old country.

Don't you make any mistake, not for that, not for the blessed honour and glory rot, but to show that he was right—right in marrying her to be a comfort and help to him—right in going after learning and discovering things in a new country that was a hundred times better than trying to make money for himself—right in everything he did—and at long last proved to be one of the tip top men of his day. That was what she wanted —for him, not no ways for herself. That was what they were both trying for with might and main when she was stung by the infernal black snake and died. What a murder it seems when you think of the number of useless wretches that tread over snakes every week of the summer, and no harm comes to them, nor wouldn't if they was to eat out of the same dish with 'em. It's one of the things I can't make out, and never shall, I expect.

We were all a bit thrown back not to find more gold in the big box. More of that, and fewer specimens, stones, and plants in the collection, as he called it, we should have fancied; but after all we were not to order how such a man as this should spend his life. He had

done what God and his dead wife called on him to do, and had close up finished his work when his end came.

Here's another bit of his journal—

"I have now dried, numbered, and scientifically named the most important collection of plants ever made in this wonderful South Land. Besides this, I believe the gold specimens and metallic ores to be unique. Had I but been spared another year I should have accompanied them to Europe, and completed the life task which I promised my sainted darling Estelle almost in her death's agony to perform; but I feel my end approaching. It is hard to die, amid these rude solitudes, peaceful as they are; but I bow to the fiat of the Great Creator. I have been averse to committing these priceless scientific treasures to the rude and careless hands of the present occupants of this retreat. I have, therefore, buried them at a spot indicated by the letters of my name and the years of my hapless life, trusting that some day the clue may be followed by persons of intelligence, and their disposal according to my last solemn wishes may be carefully carried out."

The direction given to a well-known scientific swell (Starlight said he was) in England was plain enough. The gold, the plants, and the specimens were to be sent there. The other letters and things were to go to his old family home, so they'd know at last what became of Dominick Wharton and his wife.

* * * * *

"Well," says Starlight, after smoking for ever so long, "I think we're bound to carry out this dead man's wishes. The gold there isn't worth bothering with. I wouldn't have a dead man's curse with double as much. We're *not likely* to go short of a few hundreds the way things

look now. As for the plants and specimens, no one wants to collar them. What do ye say, boys? Let's put it to the vote. Shall we pack up the whole lot and send it straight off by the first ship to his own people, the way he said? We'll put it to the vote."

Father didn't hold up his hand for a bit; but even he did, last of all. So it was carried. I think we slept better after it.

So after her death it seems that he gave himself up altogether to roaming about the bush and following on with the same sort of things as they had worked together at while she was alive. He still kept on collecting plants and specimens and so on. At times he seemed to be only half in his senses, so he said himself; but the only relief he got was in travelling about through the wildest parts of the bush, and whenever he found a fresh plant or discovered another mineral he could fancy her looking down upon him and smiling with pleasure as she used to do when she was alive.

In particular, they had both agreed, it seems, about this gold-racket, and there being for certain a lot of it to be found in Australia, just as there was in America, and Russia, and other countries as he'd travelled in. So he wanted to be able to prove this, for her sake and his, before he died.

It was hunting after this gold that made him drop down upon the Hollow one day. He was wandering along, it appears, somewhere about the tableland of Nulla Mountain when he saw a man with a gun, not a great way off, fire at a kangaroo. When he shot it, he took off the hind quarters and went away. Wharton kept him in sight; he wanted to ask him about the way the creeks ran—he never minded who he spoke to as long as they

could tell him something—when all of a sudden the man dropped over the side of the mountain and disappeared. Mr. Wharton (so he wrote it down) rubbed his eyes and looked and began to think he was dreaming. He used to see strange things sometimes, but he went back to where the kangaroo was and saw the carcass. That woke him up. Then he went to the place where he saw the man last, and after poking about, and having pretty sharp eyes for small things, he fell upon Donohoe's track—he was the man—and followed right down the gully into the Hollow.

He was stunned when he saw what a place it was, and not satisfied till he ferreted out every nook and corner of it. Donohoe and the others were going to kill him at first, but seeing he was harmless, and not likely to go back again—for he told them he intended to live here all the rest of his days if they would let him—they made him swear never to tell or show anyone the secret path, and didn't trouble themselves any more about him.

The end of it was that he built the hut and made the garden we saw. He filled up his time plant-hunting and searching for gold, some of which he gave the men from time to time. He doctored one or two of them when they were hurt, and in other ways came to be respected as a kind of well-meaning old chap that was a shingle short. When he had finished his collection he was for England, but death came it too quick on him, so he was buried under the peach tree in this blind gully. Life's a rum thing, my word! We were pretty hard set to fill up our time, or else I daresay we should none of us have had patience to listen to all this, or cared much about it if we had heard it. If we'd been in full work, *any old* man might have wasted his life picking up weeds

and bush flowers, when he could have lived different in the old country, and we'd have thought him fit for Tarban Creek. The gold was another matter altogether. The man that foraged out the gold and found ways and means to wash it, years and years before anyone had been sharp enough to do it at the Turon, hadn't a common sort of head-piece by any manner of means.

Then we saw from what he said (Starlight read this bit very careful to himself) that he had found a fairish lot of gold in the bars of the two creeks that ran through the Hollow, and had made up his mind that somewhere about where they joined and ran into the limestone hole there would be found a rich deep lead of gold, enough to find employment for thousands of men. What he had got had taken him years and years to collect in small quantities, but he was certain that in future years, from indications he had observed, enormous yields would be taken from the matrix, as well as the alluvial, and Australia become one of the richest gold producing countries in the whole world.

CHAPTER XXVI.

We did a little gold digging, and got the colour here and there, just enough to show us we might make a haul some day, but we couldn't hit it good. We rode and shot a bit, till somehow I got restless and said I'd go home for a day. It was risky, but I'd stand the racket; there couldn't be police there night and day. Father growled and said I was a dashed fool. What! did I want to run my head into a noose? We were waiting for the straight tip and then we'd try another lay. But I was that obstinate I wouldn't be turned. I wanted to see

Aileen and mother very bad; perhaps I thought I might hear something about Gracey Storefield. Anyhow I meant going.

I dressed myself pretty neat, though I took care to have nothing on to be noticed by, and rode away on an old horse that had been very fast in his day, and was just good enough for a short ride like this. He was gone in the legs, but wouldn't fall with you, and he could do his mile still in fairish time.

It was grand weather, and jolly enough till I got to the hill that looked down over the stock-yard, where Goring nailed me so simple; I wondered whether he would ever have the chance again. It was getting on late in the day, so I thought I would take a good look round in case anyone was on the look-out. I could sneak down after dark and get in on the quiet easy enough. There wouldn't be a constable on the watch always; still I knew they'd know we couldn't keep away for ever from the old place, and they wouldn't be many days without taking a look round. Anyhow I'll chance it to-night. I'd come out for a talk with Aileen and to see mother once more. And I'd do it, no matter what turns up.

I waited and waited—how long it seemed—till it was quite dark, in the scrub, for how did I know they wasn't watching the place now? Then I rode over to the barn and shoved my horse in. He was pretty hungry, though I'd pulled him some grass, and there happened to be some oaten straw. I could see the oats had been threshed out of it, and I wondered who had been doing it. I loosened the girths, but didn't take the saddle off, and hung the bridle round his neck. It was a halter-bridle, and I left the bit out of his mouth.

I walked quietly over to the hut, and looked in.

There was nobody there but the two of 'em, mother and Aileen. Lonely and miserable enough they looked, God knows, but I was that glad to see them again I hardly minded it as long as they were alive. Mother was sitting in the armchair working away—knitting, I think. I never saw her without something in her hand when she was well. Aileen was reading a book at the table, and every now and then breaking off to talk to the old woman, and trying to look cheerful like.

I knocked twice, and gave a bit of a whistle. They knew Jim and I always did that. Aileen jumped up and came to the door. Mother dropped her knitting, and sat trembling all over and crossing herself.

"Who is there?" says Aileen, coming to the door, but not opening it. Her voice was pretty firm, but I thought she trembled a bit herself.

"All right, it's me."

"Is that you, Dick?" says she, putting her hand on the bolt, which they had well fastened below the latch.

"It's all that's left of me," says I; "may I come in?"

Well, it's a wonderful thing how your own flesh and blood sticks to you through thick and thin, particularly the womenkind! If I'd been the best son and brother that ever lived, they couldn't have been more glad to see me, or made more of me—bless their hearts. Mother kept on thanking the Virgin and all the saints that had brought her her boy again before she died. If I'd come back from the wars, like fellers in books, covered with glory, she couldn't have been more loving and tender-like. Aileen kept on huggin' me till I was most out of breath. Then they both turned and looked at me again and again.

"Oh! it's me," I said just for something to say. "I suppose you hardly know me again."

"I'd know you if you were painted green," Aileen said, with the tears still wet on her face; "but, oh! how well you look beside what you did when you came out of that terrible Berrima. You've grown brown and healthy-looking again, and the light has come into your eyes, and the blood to your cheeks. You look like a man again. Oh, my God! only to think that anything should have power to alter any living creature like that. And if we could only think it would never happen again. Oh, Dick, Dick!"

"It won't ever happen again, for I'll be dead first," I said; " but we won't talk about these things, Aileen, will we? I've run a big risk to see your face and mother's again, and we must be gay as we can."

"So we will," she said, trying to smile, "so we will. Poor fellow, I mustn't make things worse than they are. Tell me all that's gone on at the Hollow. How's Jim, and father, and the Captain?"

After that she never said a word that wasn't bright and cheerful, though often enough I saw her face change, and sighs would come as if her whole heart was speaking in misery and despair she couldn't stifle. But she bustled about and got me some tea. Ready enough for it I was, too—I'd had nothing all day—and after that we had a regular right-down good talk.

I told her all about the sort of life we led at the Hollow, and what a wonderful place it was; all about Jim and me finding the last remains of Mr. Wharton, and his curious story; and all about his wife. She was ever so much taken with it, and said what a loving, true woman she must have been, and how brave it was of him to keep his promise to her, and spend the rest

of his life in loneliness and hardship for her memory's sake.

"They were worthy of each other, Dick," she said. "Theirs was a life worth living, not merely eating food, wearing clothes, sleeping and rising like most of the world. I could kneel at such people's feet and worship them, while I can't help despising most of the men and women that I meet. But God help us," she said again, "who am I that I should talk in that way? Tell me more, Dick. You can't tell how I have hungered and thirsted to meet some of you again, and open my heart."

Then I told her about Starlight, and how he had proposed to send everything home to England, even the gold, because the dead man wished it. She was quite overjoyed at the idea of our having all agreed so willingly, and couldn't praise Starlight enough.

"It's like him," she said; "there's something noble about that man, in spite of the life he has led and still leads. No one can look at him without thinking what a dreadful pity it is that a blight should have fallen upon so fair a promise as his must have been. He has friends —perhaps a mother and sisters. What demon could have tempted him to wreck his whole life—the lives and happiness of others? How full of sorrow this world is! No wonder the people of our faith are glad to leave it, and hide themselves where they can pray night and day for those they love, and have all great temptations hid away from them!"

We sat up late that night talking—talking away, as if we never would stop, about everything that had happened since we left. As the night went on she seemed to grow calmer-like, and more ready to tell me all about her thoughts and feelings, till we began to feel as if we

were children again, when Jim and I and she used to sit yarning away by the hour together, in the old barn and in this very verandah, after mother was gone to bed. She'd let us sit up till all hours; but father never would when he was at home.

Of course I began to talk about George Storefield, and she told me how he was getting on better and better in the world; everything seemed to go right with him. He'd been slaughtering at the diggings, and kept a lot of men at work, and drove about in a smart dogcart with a fine horse in it, and was making no end of money, so everybody said. He was just as kind to her and mother when he met them, and always wanted to help them. But they would not take it from him or anyone else.

"Why should we?" said Aileen, holding up her head. "I can work for both of us, and what little we want I can always have."

I looked at her hands as she said this; and it was a little thing after what we'd all gone through, but it touched me up to see how rough and hard looking her poor hands were. In old times Jim and I had been proud of their being so small and pretty looking, almost like a lady's. She took great care of them too. Now they began to look like any old washerwoman's, and it made me feel savage with myself that she should have been brought to this.

"Never mind my hands, Dick," she said smiling at me so sweet and pitiful-like. "That's not the worst of it. They keep my heart from aching. The harder I work the better I feel. It's trying to do without honest labour that we were all born to that makes more than half the sin and misery in the world."

"Why shouldn't we be able to do without it as well as others?" I said, roughly. "Lots of men and women never do a hand's turn, and expect us to have all the work, while they have all the play. That's neither right nor justice, and I'll never think it so."

"We mustn't be angry with one another, must we, Dick?" she said, "now we meet so little; but they were born to it. We were not. Their fathers made it for them, as George Storefield is making it for his children, if he ever has any. And why shouldn't they have the benefit of it?"

"Well, they're good friends to us, anyhow."

"There's poor Gracey," she went on; "she rides over, and sits with me for half a day every now and then. You can't think how kind she is! Last time she was here I was threshing out a few oats that I knew I could sell, and nothing would serve her but she must off with her skirt, and buckle to at it with me till it was done."

"I was wondering who threshed it when I saw it in the barn."

"Well, we did it between us, and great fun it was. She's a great girl for work, and says George wants her to keep a servant, but she won't do it just yet. I got 10s. a bushel for the oats. Wasn't it a fine price?"

"You're no end of a farmer," I said. "So Gracey comes often, does she?"

"Yes, she does; she's the only girl I almost ever see. Most people don't trouble themselves to come to Rocky Flat now. Oh! Dick, that girl thinks of no one in the world but you. Don't you think for her sake you might leave off—leave off what your life is now? I know it's hard. But surely you might find out some way to change it."

"Change! that's easy said. How is a fellow to change

once being started on a road like this? We may as well have some fun while our liberty lasts. Nothing 'll make much difference in the sentence we must get if we're taken. The only chance I see is to make a good haul and clear out of the colony altogether."

"But is there any hope of that?" Aileen said, looking up at me with her heart speaking in her eyes. "If I thought it was possible I should die happy."

"Well, Starlight says so; and he's the man to manage it if anyone can; he has friends in Melbourne and the other colonies, he says, and he believes it might be managed easy enough some day."

"God in Heaven grant it!" she said; "it's a blessing to think of it, anyhow."

"Why, you might have been a lady and lived in a fine house yet if you'd made it up with George Storefield," I said. "Why didn't you?"

"I could never have had a better husband. I shall always respect him; but it's all over between us for ever and a day. Poor George, I wish I could have liked him sometimes; but it doesn't matter; nothing matters now."

It was late enough when we parted; but there was plenty of time for sleep when I was gone, and the chances of seeing one another were getting smaller and smaller. There was no knowing what might happen to us at any time, and any little luck like this was like a bit of Heaven while it lasted. I was glad enough I'd come in spite of dad and the rest.

Next day I went off pretty early; not before daylight, though; I couldn't do that. It wasn't a safe thing to hang about longer. It would be sure to leak out, and then the police would keep closer watch on the place than ever. As it was they hadn't bothered them much,

though mother used to get all of a tremble, Aileen said, whenever she heard a horse's hoof now or the jingle of a bit.

Before I went I wanted Aileen to take a few notes in case she needed anything for mother or herself till she saw us again. But she wouldn't touch one of them.

"No, Dick," she said, "not if I was starving. I wouldn't stain my soul with using a shilling that had come in that way. We've enough to keep us. Why, the butter and the bacon are rising every week," she said, trying to turn it off with a laugh. "We're getting quite rich."

What she said was true enough in one way, poor thing, though some people wouldn't have turned out summer and winter at daylight, as she did, to milk the cows, feed the pigs, and do all the work she did for ten times as much. But all the farmers, little and great, were finding the benefit of the gold and the thousands of new people it brought into the country with ready money in their pockets. That made their regular business a sort of gold mine for them.

Butter and cheese, corn and chaff, beef and mutton, bacon, horses, and cows, everything they had to sell in a small way were doubled and trebled in price. They hadn't much labour to pay. The carriage of all kinds of goods rose and rose till it was a hundred pounds a ton—even more. What a chance a man had then who had a middling farm, a couple of teams, and sons able to work. That was how we stood in one way. And what had we made of it? And worse might come yet.

I couldn't stand these kind of thoughts long, so I said good-bye to mother and Aileen, and pushed away off. I was just *in time*, for I hadn't gone half-a-mile

from the house when two troopers rode at me from different sides and called on me to stand.

I wasn't going to do that, so I rammed the spurs into the old horse, lay down well on his neck, and went away as if I'd just caught sight of a mob of wild cattle in the old days. One of them let drive at me; the other raced as hard as he could lick to see if he could overhaul me. The old horse I rode wasn't a slow one; and when I was riding for my life there wasn't that man in the whole force then that could see the way I went if the timber was thick. It was a little too open at first, but it got thicker as we got up the gulley. I was making good headway when one of the men pulled up, dismounted, and took a steady aim with his rifle; it was a long shot, but he was a cool card, and nearly had me. I felt something sharp strike my shoulder, more like a stone a bullet feels than anything else, and down dropped my bridle arm. I reeled for a second or two, but gathered myself up and shifted my hand. It didn't much matter to us which hand we rode with or whether we had a bridle at all if the horse didn't run against anything. Another and another shot came—it was a repeating rifle I heard afterwards, a weapon we didn't know much about then. They came close enough, but didn't ring the bell either of them. I got well into the mountain after a bit, and all the sounds died away. It was hard and rough for hours after, but I never drew rein till I got to the tableland above the Hollow. The old horse had had pretty well enough of it by that time; but he was game, and had a dash of blood in him, and knew he was going home and he wasn't likely to give in. By this time my arm, which had been broken near the shoulder, began to be awfully painful. I was nearly as bad as Starlight

must have been the first day we saw him come down the track on the other side of the valley with Warrigal. But I had no half-caste to help me; what I was afraid of was that I might faint and fall off. Then if they followed up the tracks they might have me and find out the Hollow, which was worse than all.

They hadn't a black tracker with them, that was one thing; and as none of the police at that time were natives of the colony, or had been brought up in it, it wasn't likely that they'd be able to run a single horse's tracks through such a country. I'd got off once or twice, too, in the rockiest places and led the old horse, so that it was pretty likely they'd be thrown bodily off the tracks after a few miles, and, not knowing which way I was heading, never find 'em again. Anyhow, I was too stiff to get off now; so I rode right down the mountain-side track, and every step the old horse took I thought my arm would come right off, and my head burst in two with the pain. When the old horse pulled up at the cave (they'd often used him as a pack-horse, and he knew it like a book) I dropped slap off, and never knew anything more about anything till I found myself in my blankets and Jim sitting smoking alongside of me. My arm and shoulder were all bound up, and I felt as stiff as if the whole of me was made of wood, and had been broken and fresh mended again.

"You've been and done it this time, old man," says he; "looks as if you'd been in the hands of the Philistines. Starlight says dad was awful wild, cursed and swore terrible, till we had to shut him up. Tell us all about it. You seen 'em at home, didn't you?"

"Yes," I said; "had a good yarn with Ailie and

mother. I'm glad it wasn't going there when those thundering police dropped across me. By Jove! I'll be quits with them some day."

"They're only doing their duty, Dick. It's all in the day's work. It's no use growling at them; we should do the same in their place."

"I suppose so, but it's enough to make a fellow savage to think he can't ride home for a yarn with his own people, not thinking of doing harm to any living soul, but he must be hunted down and potted at as if he was a wild bullock in George Street."

"They ought to let us have a week now and then," said Jim, with a kind of smile on his face. "What do they call it in the history books? A truce, you know; when we could run in and out and have a bit of quiet time like, and then start fair again next Monday morning. I'm afraid our army's too small for that. We can't expect any mercy—or the rules of war."

"No; and I'll show them none," I said. "Wait till I get out again."

"I don't hold with you there, Dick," said he, very sober-like. "We must stand up to our fight now and take our punishment when we get it like men. It's no use losing our tempers and making innocent people suffer. That won't mend it; and I'll never agree to it for one, and so I tell you."

Jim began to look quite fierce for him. I was going to say something pretty hot, too, I expect, when a terrible pain shot through my head, and then something deadly crept about my heart. I didn't hear any more; I suppose I fainted.

CHAPTER XXVII.

I WAS right in about a week, as far as being able to walk about and look after myself, but it was nearer a month before my arm was any manner of use to me. Starlight and father set it between them, and didn't make such a bad mend of it, considering there was no doctor handy. We were a hardish crowd, anyhow, and it took a lot to knock us over; but I'd lost a deal of blood, and felt weakish for a good while and off my regular form. What I got most wild over when I thought of it was that poor Aileen must have heard the shots, and that the police would be sure to come back to the place and ask when she had seen me last. That would torment her all the worse, as long as they weren't sure whether I was badly hurt or not. Thinking how much of it was my own fault didn't make it easier to bear. Some people think it ought to; I can't see how they make that out.

It only made me savager and worse natured than I'd been before. When I left Ailie that morning I felt a better man, and more likely to go in for a square way of living, if I could have got half a chance of leaving the old track. I was doing no harm and not thinking any to a living soul; and here, because there was a warrant out for me and a price on my head, a couple of young fellows just a year away from the old country must hunt me the moment they set eyes on me, within a mile of the place I was born in, and try and shoot me down with as little mercy as the overseers show to a strange dog on a sheep-run. Of course it was their duty, in a general way, as Jim said. But I had the feelings of a man for all that; and even if a fellow has done what's wrong and knows it, he don't like to be

treated like a wild beast. I didn't say much, but I brooded over things a good deal, and bided my time till something else turned up. It wasn't long before a chance came, and I took it.

We had word through father. He was the intelligence man, and had all the news sent to him—roundabout it might be, but it always came, and was generally true; and the old man never troubled anybody twice that he couldn't believe in, great things or small. Well, word was passed about a branch bank at a place called Ballabri, where a goodish bit of gold was sent to wait the monthly escort. There was only the manager and one clerk there now, the other cove having gone away on sick leave. Towards the end of the month the bank gold was heaviest and the most notes in the safe. The smartest way would be to go into the bank just before shutting-up time—three o'clock, about—and hand a cheque over the counter. While the clerk was looking at it, out with a revolver and cover him. The rest was easy enough. A couple more walked in after, and while one jumped over the counter and bailed up the manager the other shut the door. Nothing strange about that. The door was always shut at three o'clock sharp. Nobody in town would drop to what might be going on inside till the whole thing was over, and the swag ready to be popped into a light trap and cleared off with.

That was the idea. We had plenty of time to think it over and settle it all, bit by bit, beforehand.

So one morning we started early and took the job in hand. Every little thing was looked through and talked over a week before. Father got Mr. White's buggy-horses ready and took Warrigal with him to a place where a man met him with a light four-wheeled Yankee trap and

harness. Dad was dressed up to look like a back-country squatter. Lots of 'em were quite as rough-looking as he was, though they drive as good horses as any gentleman in the land. Warrigal was togged out something like a groom, with a bit of the station-hand about him. Their saddles and bridles they kept with 'em in the trap; they didn't know when they might want them. They had on their revolvers underneath their coats. We were to go round by another road and meet at the township.

Well, everything turned out first-rate. When we got to Ballabri there was father walking his horses up and down. They wanted cooling, my word. They'd come pretty smart all the way, but they were middlin' soft, being in great grass condition and not having done any work to speak of for a goodish while, and being a bit above themselves in a manner of speaking. We couldn't help laughing to see how solemn and respectable dad looked.

"My word," said Jim, "if he ain't the dead image of old Mr. Carter, of Brahway, where we shore three years back. Just such another hard-faced, cranky-looking old chap, ain't he, Dick? I'm that proud of him I'd do anything he asked me now, blest if I wouldn't!"

"Your father's a remarkable man," says Starlight, quite serious; "must have made his way in life if he hadn't shown such a dislike to anything on the square. If he'd started a public-house and a pound about the time he turned his mind to cattle-duffing as one of the fine arts, he'd have had a bank account by this time that would have kept him as honest as a judge. But it's the old story. I say, where are the police quarters? It's only manners to give them a call."

We rode over to the barracks. They weren't much. A four-roomed cottage, a log lock-up with two cells, a

four-stalled stable, and a horse yard. Ballabri was a small township with a few big stations, a good many farms about it, and rather more public-houses than any other sort of buildings in it. A writing chap said once, "A large well-filled graveyard, a small church mostly locked up, six public-houses gave the principal features of Ballabri township. The remaining ones appear to be sand, bones, and broken bottles, with a sprinkling of inebriates and black-fellows." With all that there was a lot of business done there in a year by the stores and inns, particularly since the diggings. What ever becomes of the money made in such places? Where does it all go to? Nobody troubles their heads about that.

A goodish lot of the first people was huddled away in the graveyard under the sand ridges. Many an old shepherd had hobbled into the Travellers' Rest with a big cheque for a fortnight's spree, and had stopped behind in the graveyard, too, for company. It was always a wonderful place for steadying lushingtons, was Ballabri.

Anyhow we rode over to the barracks because we knew the senior constable was away. We'd got up a sham horse-stealing case the day before, through some chaps there that we knew. This drawed him off about fifty mile. The constable left behind was a youngish chap, and we intended to have a bit of fun with him. So we went up to the garden gate and called out for the officer in charge of police quite grand.

"Here I am," says he, coming out, buttoning up his uniform coat. "Is anything the matter?"

"Oh! not much," says I; "but there's a man sick at the Sportsman's Arms. He's down with the typhus fever or something. He's a mate of ours, and we've come from Mr. Grant's station. He wants a doctor fetched."

"Wait a minute till I get my revolver," says he, buttoning up his waistcoat. He was just fresh from the depôt; plucky enough, but not up to half the ways of the bush.

"You'll do very well as you are," says Starlight, bringing out his pretty sharp, and pointing it full at his head. "You stay there till I give you leave."

He stood there quite stunned, while Jim and I jumped off and muzzled him. He hadn't a chance, of course, with one of us on each side, and Starlight threatening to shoot him if he raised a finger.

"Let's put him in the logs," says Jim. "My word! just for a lark; turn for turn. Fair play, young fellow. You're being 'run in' yourself now. Don't make a row, and no one'll hurt you."

The keys were hanging up inside, so we pushed him into the furthest cell and locked both doors. There were no windows, and the lock-up, like most bush ones, was built of heavy logs, just roughly squared, with the ceiling the same sort, so there wasn't much chance of his making himself heard. If any noise did come out the town people would only think it was a drunken man, and take no notice.

We lost no time then, and Starlight rode up to the bank first. It was about ten minutes to three o'clock. Jim and I popped our horses into the police stables, and put on a couple of their waterproof capes. The day was a little showery. Most of the people we heard afterwards took us for troopers from some other station on the track of bushrangers, and not in regular uniform. It wasn't a bad joke, though, and the police got well chaffed about it.

We dodged down very careless-like to the bank, and

went in a minute or two after Starlight. He was waiting patiently with the cheque in his hand till some old woman got her money. She counted it, shillings, pence, and all, and then went out. The next moment Starlight pushed his cheque over. The clerk looks at it for a moment, and quick-like says, "How will you have it?"

"This way," Starlight answered, pointing his revolver at his head, "and don't you stir or I'll shoot you before you can raise your hand."

The manager's room was a small den at one side. They don't allow much room in country banks unless they make up their mind to go in for a regular swell building. I jumped round and took charge of the young man. Jim shut and locked the front door while Starlight knocked at the manager's room. He came out in a hurry, expecting to see one of the bank customers. When he saw Starlight's revolver, his face changed quick enough, but he made a rush to his drawer where he kept his revolver, and tried to make a fight of it, only we were too quick for him. Starlight put the muzzle of his pistol to his forehead and swore he'd blow out his brains there and then if he didn't stop quiet. We had to use the same words over and over again. Jim used to grin sometimes. They generally did the business, though, so of course he was quite helpless. We hadn't to threaten him to find the key of the safe, because it was unlocked and the key in it. He was just locking up his gold and the day's cash as we came in.

We tied him and the young fellow fast, legs and arms, and laid them down on the floor while we went through the place. There was a good lot of gold in the safe all weighed and labelled ready for the escort, which called there once a month. Bundles of notes, too; bags

of sovereigns, silver, and copper. The last we didn't take. But all the rest we bundled up or put into handy boxes and bags we found there. Father had come up by this time as close as he could to the back-yard. We carried everything out and put them into his express-waggon; he shoved a rug over them and drove off, quite easy and comfortable. We locked the back door of the bank and chucked away the key, first telling the manager not to make a row for ten minutes or we might have to come back again. He was a plucky fellow, and we hadn't been rough with him. He had sense enough to see that he was overmatched, and not to fight when it was no good. I've known bankers to make a regular good fight of it, and sometimes come off best when their places was stuck up; but not when they were bested from the very start, like this one. No man could have had a show, if he was two or three men in one, at the Ballabri money-shop. We walked slap down to the hotel—then it was near the bank—and called for drinks. There weren't many people in the streets at that time in the afternoon, and the few that did notice us didn't think we were anyone in particular. Since the diggings broke out all sorts of travellers a little out of the common were wandering all about the country—speculators in mines, strangers, new chums of all kinds; even the cattle-drovers and stockmen, having their pockets full of money, began to put on more side and dress in a flash way. The bush people didn't take half the notice of strangers they would have done a couple of years before.

So we had our drinks, and shouted for the landlord and the people in the bar; walked up to the police-station, took out our horses, and rode quickly off, while father was nearly five miles away on a cross-road, mak-

ing Mr. White's trotters do their best time, and with seven or eight thousand pounds' worth of gold and cash under the driving seat. That, I often think, was about the smartest trick we ever did. It makes me laugh when I remember how savage the senior constable was when he came home, found his sub in a cell, the manager and his clerk just untied, the bank robbed of nearly everything, and us gone hours ago, with about as much chance of catching us as a mob of wild cattle that got out of the yard the night before.

Just about dark father made the place where the man met him with the trap before. Fresh horses was put in and the man drove slap away another road. He and Warrigal mounted the two brown horses and took the stuff in saddle-bags, which they'd brought with 'em. They were back at the Hollow by daylight, and we got there about an hour afterwards. We only rode sharp for the first twenty miles or so, and took it easier afterwards.

If sticking up the Goulburn mail made a noise in the country, you may depend the Ballabri bank robbery made ten times as much. Every little newspaper and all the big ones, from one end of the colony to the other, were full of it. The robbery of a bank in broad daylight, almost in the middle of the day, close to a police station, and with people going up and down the streets, seemed too out-and-out cheeky to be believed. What was the country coming to? "It was the fault of the gold that unsettled young fellows' minds," some said, "and took them away from honest industry." Our minds had been unsettled long before the gold, worse luck. Some shouted for more police protection; some for vigilance committees; all bushrangers and horse-thieves to be strung up to the next tree. The whole country-side was in an

uproar, except the people at the diggings, who had most of them been in other places, and knew that, compared with them, Australia was one of the safest countries any man could live or travel in. A good deal of fun was made out of our locking up the constable in his own cell. I believe he got blown up, too, and nearly dismissed by his inspector for not having his revolver on him and ready for use. But young men that were any good were hard to get for the police just then, and his fault was passed over. It's a great wonder to me more banks were not robbed when you think of it. A couple of young fellows are sent to a country place; there's no decent buildings, or anything reasonable for them to live in, and they're expected to take care of four or five thousand pounds and a lot of gold, as if it was so many bags of potatoes. If there's police, they're half their time away. The young fellows can't be all their time in the house, and two or three determined men, whether they're bushrangers or not, that like to black their faces, and walk in at any time that they're not expected, can sack the whole thing, and no trouble to them. I call it putting temptation in people's way, and some of the blame ought to go on the right shoulders. As I said before, the little affair made a great stir, and all the police in the country were round Ballabri for a bit, tracking and tracking till all hours, night and day; but they couldn't find out what had become of the wheel-marks, nor where our horse tracks led to. The man that owned the express waggon drove it into a scrubby bit of country and left it there; he knew too much to take it home. Then he brought away the wheels one by one on horseback, and carted the body in a long time after with a load of wool, just before a heavy rain set in and washed out every track as clean as a whistle.

Nothing in that year could keep people's thoughts long away from the diggings, which was just as well for us. Everything but the gold was forgotten after a week. If the harbour had dried up or Sydney town been buried by an earthquake,. nobody would have bothered themselves about such trifles so long as the gold kept turning up hand over hand the way it did. There seemed no end to it. New diggings jumped up every day, and now another big rush broke out in Port Phillip that sent everyone wilder than ever.

Starlight and us two often used to have a quiet talk about Melbourne. We all liked that side of the country; there seemed an easier chance of getting straight away from there than any part of New South Wales, where so many people knew us and everybody was on the look-out.

All kinds of things passed through our minds, but the notion we liked best was taking one of the gold ships bodily and sailing her away to a foreign port, where her name could be changed, and she never heard of again, if all went well. That would be a big touch and no mistake. Starlight, who had been at sea, and was always ready for anything out of the way and uncommon, the more dangerous the better, thought it might be done without any great risk or bother.

"A ship in harbour," he said, "is something like the Ballabri bank. No one expects anything to happen in harbour, consequently there's no watch kept or any lookout that's worth much. Any sudden dash with a few good men and she'd be off and out to sea before anyone could say 'knife.'"

Father didn't like this kind of talk. He was quite satisfied where we were. We were safe there, he said; *and,* as long as we kept our heads, no one need ever be

the wiser how it was we always seemed to go through the ground and no one could follow us up. What did we fret after? Hadn't we everything we wanted in the world—plenty of good grub, the best of liquor, and the pick of the country-side for horses, besides living among our own friends and in the country we were born in, and that had the best right to keep us. If we once got among strangers and in another colony we should be "given away" by someone or other, and be sure to come to grief in the long run.

Well, we couldn't go and cut out this ship all at once, but Jim and I didn't leave go of the notion, and we had many a yarn with Starlight about it when we were by ourselves.

What made us more set upon clearing out of the country was that we were getting a good bit of money together, and of course we hadn't much chance of spending it. Every place where we'd been seen was that well watched there was no getting nigh it, and every now and then a strong mob of police, ordered down by telegraph, would muster at some particular spot where they thought there was a chance of surrounding us. However, that dodge wouldn't work. They couldn't surround the Hollow. It was too big, and the gullies between the rocks too deep. You could see across a place sometimes that you had to ride miles round to get over. Besides, no one knew there was such a place, leastways that we were there, any more than if we had been in New Zealand.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AFTER the Ballabri affair we had to keep close for weeks and weeks. The whole place seemed to be alive with police. We heard of them being on Nulla Mountain and close enough to the Hollow now and then. But Warrigal and father had places among the rocks where they could sit up and see everything for miles round. Dad had taken care to get a good glass, too, and he could sweep the country round about almost down to Rocky Flat. Warrigal's eyes were sharp enough without a glass, and he often used to tell us he seen things—men, cattle, and horses—that we couldn't make out a bit in the world. We amused ourselves for a while the best way we could by horse-breaking, shooting, and what not; but we began to get awful tired of it, and ready for anything, no matter what, that would make some sort of change.

One day father told us a bit of news that made a stir in the camp, and nearly would have Jim and me clear out altogether if we'd had any place to go to. For some time past, it seems, dad had been grumbling about being left to himself so much, and, except this last fakement, not having anything to do with the road work. "It's all devilish fine for you and your brother and the Captain there to go flashin' about the country and sporting your figure on horseback, while I'm left alone to do the housekeepin' in the Hollow. I'm not going to be wood-and-water Joey, I can tell ye, not for you nor no other men. So I've made it right with a couple of chaps as I've know'd these years past, and we can do a touch now and then, as well as you grand gentlemen, on the 'high toby,' *as they* call it where I came from."

"I didn't think you were such an old fool, Ben," said Starlight; "but keeping this place here a dead secret is our sheet-anchor. Lose that, and we'll be run into in a week. If you let it out to any fellow you come across, you will soon know all about it."

"I've known Dan Moran and Pat Burke nigh as long as I've known you, for the matter of that," says father. "They're safe enough, and they're not to come here or know where I hang out neither. We've other places to meet, and what we do 'll be clean done, I'll go bail."

"It doesn't matter two straws to me, as I've told you many a time," said Starlight, lighting a cigar (he always kept a good supply of them). "But you see if Dick and Jim, now, don't suffer for it before long."

"It was I as told you about the place, wasn't it?" growls father; "don't you suppose I know how to put a man right? I look to have my turn at steering this here ship, or else the crew better go ashore for good."

Father had begun to drink harder now than he used; that was partly the reason. And when he'd got his liquor aboard he was that savage and obstinate there was no doing anything with him. We couldn't well part. We couldn't afford to do without each other. So we had to patch it up the best way we could, and let him have his own way. But we none of us liked the new-fangled way, and made sure bad would come of it.

We all knew the two men, and didn't half like them. They were the head men of a gang that mostly went in for horse-stealing, and only did a bit of regular bushranging when they was sure of getting clear off. They'd never shown out the fighting way yet, though they were ready enough for it if it couldn't be helped.

Moran was a dark, thin, wiry-looking native chap, with

a big beard, and a nasty beady black eye like a snake's. He was a wonderful man outside of a horse, and as active as a cat, besides being a deal stronger than anyone would have taken him to be. He had a drawling way of talking, and was one of those fellows that liked a bit of cruelty when he had the chance. I believe he'd rather shoot anyone than not, and when he was worked up he was more like a devil than a man. Pat Burke was a broad-shouldered, fair-complexioned fellow, most like an Englishman, though he was a native too. He'd had a small station once, and might have done well (I was going to say) if he'd had sense enough to go straight. What rot it all is! Couldn't we all have done well, if the devils of idleness and easy-earned money and false pride had let us alone?

Father said his bargain with these chaps was that he should send down to them when anything was up that more men was wanted for, and they was always to meet him at a certain place. He said they'd be satisfied with a share of whatever the amount was, and that they'd never want to be shown the Hollow or to come anigh it. They had homes and places of their own, and didn't want to be known more than could be helped. Besides this, if anything turned up that was real first chop, they could always find two or three more young fellows that would stand a flutter, and disappear when the job was done. This was worth thinking over, he said, because there weren't quite enough of us for some things, and we could keep these other chaps employed at outside work.

There was something in this, of course, and dad was generally near the mark, there or thereabouts, so we let things drift. One thing was that these chaps could often lay their hands upon a goodish lot of horses of cattle;

and if they delivered them to any two of us 20 miles from the Hollow, they could be popped in there, and neither they or anyone else the wiser. You see father didn't mind taking a hand in the bushranging racket, but his heart was with the cattle and horse-duffing that he'd been used to so long, and he couldn't quite give it up. It's my belief he'd have sooner made a tenpound note by an unbranded colt or a mob of fat cattle than five times as much in any other way. Every man to his taste, they say.

Well, between this new fad of the old man's and our having a notion that we had better keep quiet for a spell and let things settle down a bit, we had a long steady talk, and the end of it was that we made up our minds to go and put in a month or two at the diggings.

We took a horse apiece that weren't much account, so we could either sell them or lose them, it did not make much odds which, and made a start for Jonathan Barnes's place. We got word from him every now and then, and knew that the police had never found out that we had been there, going or coming. Jonathan was a blowing, blatherskiting fool; but his very foolishness in that way made them think he knew nothing at all. He had just sense enough not to talk about us, and they never thought about asking him. So we thought we'd have a bit of fun there before we settled down for work at the Turon. We took old saddles and bridles, and had a middling-sized swag in front, just as if we'd come a long way. We dressed pretty rough too; we had longish hair and beards, and (except Starlight) might have been easy taken for down-the-river stockmen or drovers.

When we got to Barnes's place he and the old woman

seemed ever so glad to see us. Bella and Maddie rushed out, making a great row, and chattering both at a time.

"Why, we thought you were lost, or shot, or something," Bella says. "You might have sent us a letter, or a message, only I suppose you didn't think it worth while."

"What a bad state the country's getting in," says Maddie. "Think of them bushrangers sticking up the bank at Ballabri, and locking up the constable in his own cell. Ha! ha! The police magistrate was here to-night. You should have heard Bella talking so nice and proper to him about it."

"Yes, and you said they'd all be caught and hanged," said Bella; "that it was settin' such a bad example to the young men of the colony. My word! it was as good as a play. Mad was so full of her fun, and when the P.M. said they'd be sure to be caught in the long run, Maddie said they'd have to import some thoroughbred police to catch 'em, for our Sydney-side ones didn't seem to have pace enough. This made the old gentleman stare, and he looked at Maddie as if she was out of her mind. Didn't he, Mad?"

"I do think it's disgraceful of Goring and his lot not to have run them in before," says Starlight, "but it wouldn't do for us to interfere."

"Ah! but Sir Ferdinand Morringer's come up now," says Maddie. "He'll begin to knock saucepans out of all the boys between here and Weddin Mountain. He was here, too, and asked us a lot of questions about people who were 'wanted' in these parts."

"He fell in love with Maddie, too," says Bella, "and gave her one of the charms off his watch chain—such a pretty one, too. He's going to catch Starlight's mob, as

he calls them. Maddie says she'll send him word if ever she knows of their being about."

"Well done, Maddie!" says Jim; "so you may, just an hour or two after we're started. There won't be much likelihood of his overhauling us then. He won't be the first man that's been fooled by a woman, will he?"

"Or the last, Jim," says Bella. "What do you say, Captain? It seems to me we're doing all the talking, and you're doing all the listening. That isn't fair, you know. We like to hear ourselves talk, but fair play is bonny play. Suppose you tell us what you've been about all this time. I think tea's ready."

We had our innings in the talking line; Jim and Maddie made noise enough for half-a-dozen. Starlight let himself be talked to, and didn't say much himself; but I could see even he, that had seen a lot of high life in his time, was pleased enough with the nonsense of a couple of good-looking girls like these—regular bush-bred fillies as they were—after being shut up in the Hollow for a month or two.

Before we'd done a couple of travellers rode up. Jonathan's place was getting a deal more custom now—it lay near about the straight line for the Turon, and came to be known as a pretty comfortable shop. Jonathan came in with them, and gave us a wink as much as to say, "It's all right."

"These gentlemen's just come up from Sydney," he said, "not long from England, and wants to see the diggings. I told 'em you might be going that way, and could show 'em the road."

"Very happy," says Starlight. "I am from Port Phillip last myself, and think of going back by Honolulu after I've made the round of the colonies. My good friends

and travelling companions are on their way for the Darling. We can all travel together."

"What a fortunate thing we came here, Clifford, eh?" says one young fellow, putting up his eyeglass. "You wanted to push on. Now we shall have company, and not lose our way in this beastly 'bush' as they call it."

"Well, it does look like luck," says the other man. "I was beginning to think the confounded place was getting further off every day. Can you show us our rooms, if you please? I suppose we couldn't have a bath?"

"Oh! yes, you can," said Maddie; "there's the creek at the bottom of the garden, only there's snakes now and then at night. I'll get you towels."

"In that case I think I shall prefer to wait till the morning," says the tall man. "It will be something to look forward to."

We were afraid the strangers would have spoiled our fun for the evening, but they didn't; we made out afterwards that the tall one was a lord. They were just like anybody else, and when we got the piano to work after tea they made themselves pleasant enough, and Starlight sang a song or two—he could sing, and no mistake, when he liked—and then one of them played a waltz and the girls danced together, and Starlight had some champagne in, said it was his birthday, and he'd just thought of it, and they got quite friendly and jolly before we turned in.

Next day we made a start, promising the girls a nugget each for a ring out of the first gold we got, and they promised to write to us and tell us if they heard any news. They knew what to say, and we shouldn't be caught simple if they could help it. Jim took care, *though*, to keep well off the road, and take all the short

-ats he knew. We weren't quite safe till we was in the thick of the mining crowd. That's the best place for a man, or woman either, to hide that wants to drop out of sight and never be seen again. Many a time I've known a man, called Jack or Tom among the diggers, and never thought of as anything else, working like them, drinking and taking his pleasure and dressing like them, till he made his pile or died, or something, and then it turned out he was the Honourable Mr. So-and-So, Captain This, or Major That; perhaps the Reverend Somebody—though that didn't happen often.

We were all the more contented, though, when we heard the row of the cradles and the clang and bang of the stampers in the quartz-crushing batteries again, and saw the big crowd moving up and down like a hill of ants, the same as when we'd left Turon last. As soon as we got into the main street we parted. Jim and I touched our hats and said good-bye to Starlight and the other two, who went away to the crack hotel. We went and made a camp down by the creek, so that we might turn to and peg out a claim, or buy out a couple of shares, first thing in the morning.

Except the Hollow it was the safest place in the whole country just now, as we could hear that every week fresh people were pouring in from all the other colonies, and every part of the world. The police on the diggings had their own work pretty well cut out for them, what with old hands from Van Dieman's Land, Californians—and, you may bet, roughs and rascals from every place under the sun. Besides, we wanted to see for ourselves how the thing was done, and pick up a few wrinkles that might come in handy afterwards. Our dodge was to take a few notes with us, and buy into a

claim—one here, one there—not to keep together for fear of consequences. If we worked and kept steady at it, in a place where there were thousands of strangers of all kinds, it would take the devil himself to pick us out of such a queer, bubbling, noisy, mixed-up pot of hell-broth.

Things couldn't have dropped in more lucky for us than they did. In this way. Starlight was asked by the two swells to join them, because they wanted to do a bit of digging, just for the fun of it; and he made out he'd just come from Melbourne, and hadn't been six months longer in the country than they had. Of course he was sunburnt a bit. He got that in India, he said. My word! they played just into his hand, and he did the new-chum swell all to pieces, and so that natural no one could have picked him out from them. He dressed like them, talked like them, and never let slip a word except about shooting in England, hunting in America and India, besides gammoning to be as green about all Australian ways as if he'd never seen a gum-tree before. They took up a claim, and bought a tent. Then they got a wages-man to help them, and all four used to work like niggers. The crowd christened them "The Three Honourables," and used to have great fun watching them working away in their jerseys, and handling their picks and shovels like men. Starlight used to drawl just like the other two, and ask questions about the colony; and walk about with them on Sundays and holidays in fashionable cut clothes. He'd brought money, too, and paid his share of the expenses, and something over. It was a great sight to see at night, and people said like nothing else in the world just then. Everyone turned out for an hour *or two* at night, and then was the time to see the Turon

in its glory. Big, sunburnt men, with beards, and red silk sashes round their waists, with a sheath-knife and revolvers mostly stuck in them, and broad-leaved felt hats on. There were Californians, then foreigners of all sorts—Frenchmen, Italians, Germans, Spaniards, Greeks, Negroes, Indians, Chinamen. They were a droll, strange, fierce-looking crowd. There weren't many women at first, but they came pretty thick after a bit. A couple of theatres were open, a circus, hotels with lots of plate-glass windows and splendid bars, all lighted up, and the front of them, anyhow, handsome at first sight as Sydney or Melbourne. Drapers and grocers, ironmongers, general stores, butchers and bakers, all kept open until midnight, and every place was lighted up as clear as day. It was like a fairy-story place, Jim said; he was as pleased as a child with the glitter and show and strangeness of it all. Nobody was poor, everybody was well-dressed, and had money to spend, from the children upwards. Liquor seemed running from morning to night, as if there were creeks of it; all the same there was very little drunkenness and quarrelling. The police kept good order, and the miners were their own police mostly, and didn't seem to want keeping right. We always expected the miners to be a disorderly, rough set of people—it was quite the other way. Only we had got into a world where everybody had everything they wanted, or else had the money to pay for it. How different it seemed from the hard, grinding, poverty-stricken life we had been brought up to, and all the settlers we knew when we were young. People had to work hard for every pound they made then, and, if they hadn't the ready cash, obliged to do without, even if it was bread to eat. Many a time we'd had no tea and sugar when we were little, because father

hadn't the money to pay for it. That was when he stayed at home and worked for what he got. Well, it was honest money, at any rate—pity he hadn't kept that way.

Now all this was changed. It wasn't like the same country. Everybody dressed well, lived high, and the money never ran short, nor was likely to as long as the gold kept spreading, and was found in 10, 20, 50 pound nuggets every week or two. We had a good claim, and began to think about six months' work would give us enough to clear right away with. We let our hair grow long, and made friends with some Americans, so we began to talk a little like them, just for fun, and most people took us for Yankees. We didn't mind that. Anything was better than being taken for what we were. And if we could get clear off to San Francisco there were lots of grand new towns springing up near the Rocky Mountains, where a man could live his life out peaceably, and never be heard of again.

As for Starlight he'd laid it out with his two noble friends to go back to Sydney in two or three months, and run down to Honolulu in one of the trading vessels. They could get over to the Pacific slope, or else have a year among the Islands, and go anywhere they pleased. They had got that fond of Haughton, as he called himself—Frank Haughton—that nothing would have persuaded them to part company. And wasn't he a man to be fond of?—always ready for anything, always good-tempered except when people wouldn't let him, ready to work or fight or suffer hardship, if it came to that, just as cheerful as he went to his dinner—never thinking or talking much about himself, but always there when he *was wanted*. You couldn't have made a more out-and-

out all round man to live and die with; and yet, wasn't it a murder, that there should be that against him, when it came out, that spoiled the whole lot? We used to meet now and then, but never noticed one another except by a bit of a nod or a wink, in public. One day Jim and I were busy puddling some dirt, and we saw Sergeant Goring ride by with another trooper. He looked at us, but we were splashed with yellow mud, and had handkerchiefs tied over our heads. I don't think mother would have known us. He just glanced over at us and took no notice. If he didn't know us there was no fear of anyone else being that sharp to do it. So we began to take it easy, and to lose our fear of being dropped on at any time. Ours was a middling good claim, too; two men's ground; and we were lucky from the start. Jim took to the pick and shovel work from the first, and was as happy as a man could be.

After our day's work we used to take a stroll through the lighted streets at night. What a place it had grown to be, and how different it was from being by ourselves at the Hollow. The gold was coming in that fast that it paid people to build more shops, and bring up goods from Sydney every week, until there wasn't any mortal thing you couldn't get there for money. Everything was dear, of course; but everybody had money, and nobody minded paying two prices when they were washing, perhaps, two or three pounds' weight of gold out of a tub of dirt.

One night Jim and I were strolling about with some of our Yankee friends, when someone said there'd been a new hotel opened by some Melbourne people which was very swell, and we might take a look at it. We didn't say no, so we all went into the parlour and called

for drinks. The landlady herself came in, dressed up to the nines, and made herself agreeable, as she might well do. We were all pretty well in, but one of the Americans owned the Golden Gate claim, and was supposed to be the richest man on the field. He'd known her before.

"Waal, Mrs. Mullockson," says he, "so you've pulled up stakes from Bendigo City and concluded to locate here. How do you approbate Turon?"

She said something or other, we hardly knew what. Jim and I couldn't help giving one look. Her eyes turned on us. We could see she knew us, though she hadn't done so at first. We took no notice; no more did she, but she followed us to the door, and touched me on the shoulder.

"You're not going to desert old friends, Dick?" she said, in a low voice. "I wrote you a cross letter, but we must forgive and forget, you know. You and Jim come up to-morrow night, won't you?"

"All right, Kate," I said, and we followed our party.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THIS meeting with Kate Morrison put the stuns upon me and Jim, and no mistake. We never expected to see her up at the Turon, and it all depended which way the fit took her now whether it would be a fit place for us to live in any longer. Up to this time we had done capital well. We had been planted as close as if we had been at the Hollow. We'd had lots of work, and company, and luck. It began to look as if our luck would be dead out. Anyhow, we were at the mercy of

a tiger-cat of a woman who might let loose her temper at any time and lay the police on to us, without thinking twice about it. We didn't think she knew Starlight was there, but she was knowing enough for anything. She could put two and two together, and wait and watch, too. It gave me a fit of the shivers every time I thought of it. This was the last place I ever expected to see her at. However, you never can tell what'll turn up in this world. She might have got over her tantrums.

Of course we went over to the Prospectors' Arms that night, as the new hotel was called, and found quite a warm welcome. Mrs. Mullockson had turned into quite a fashionable lady since the Melbourne days; dressed very grand, and talked and chaffed with the commissioner, the police inspectors, and goldfield officers from the camp as if she'd been brought up to it. People lived fast in those goldfields days; it don't take long to pick up that sort of learning.

The Prospectors' Arms became quite the go, and all the swell miners and quartz reefers began to meet there as a matter of course. There was Dandy Green, the Lincolnshire man from Beevor, that used to wear no end of boots and spend pounds and pounds in blacking. He used to turn out with everything clean on every morning, fit to go to a ball, as he walked on to the brace. There was Ballersdorf, the old Prussian soldier, that had fought against Boney, and owned half-a-dozen crushing machines and a sixth share in the Great Wattle Flat Company; Dan Robinson, the man that picked up the 70lb. nugget; Sam Dawson, of White Hills, and Peter Paul, the Canadian, with a lot of others, all known men, went there regular. Some of them didn't mind spending fifty or a hundred pounds in a night if the fit took them. The

house began to do a tremendous trade, and no mistake.

Old Mullockson was a quiet, red-faced old chap, who seemed to do all Kate told him, and never bothered himself about the business, except when he had to buy fresh supplies in the wine and spirit line. There he was first chop. You couldn't lick him for quality. And so the place got a name.

But where was Jeanie all this time? That was what Jim put me up to ask the first night we came. "Oh! Jeanie, poor girl, she was stopping with her aunt in Melbourne." But Kate had written to her, and she was coming up in a few weeks. This put Jim into great heart. What with the regular work and the doing well in the gold line, and Jeanie coming up, poor old Jim looked that happy that he was a different man. No wonder the police didn't know him. He had grown out of his old looks and ways; and though they rubbed shoulders with us every day, no one had eyes sharp enough to see that James Henderson and his brother Dick—mates with the best men on the field—were escaped prisoners, and had a big reward on them besides.

Nobody knew it, and that was pretty nigh as good as if it wasn't true. So we held on, and made money hand over fist. We used to go up to the hotel whenever we'd an evening to spare, but that wasn't often. We intended to keep our money this time, and no publican was to be any the better for our hard work.

As for Kate, I couldn't make her out. Most times she'd be that pleasant and jolly no one could help liking her. She had a way of talking to me and telling me everything that happened, because I was an old friend *she said*—that pretty nigh knocked me over, I tell you.

Other times she was that savage and violent no one would go near her. She didn't care who it was—servants or customers, they all gave her a wide berth when she was in her tantrums. As for old Mullockson, he used to take a drive to Sawpit Gully or Ten-Mile as soon as ever he saw what o'clock it was—and glad to clear out, too. She never dropped on to me, somehow. Perhaps she thought she'd get as good as she gave; I wasn't over good to lead, and couldn't be drove at the best of times. No! not by no woman that ever stepped.

One evening Starlight and his two swell friends comes in, quite accidental like. They sat down at a small table by themselves and ordered a couple of bottles of foreign wine. There was plenty of that if you liked to pay a guinea a bottle. I remember when common brandy was that price at first, and I've seen it fetched out of a doctor's tent as medicine. It paid him better than his salts and rhubarb. That was before the hotels opened, and while all the grog was sold on the sly. They marched in, dressed up as if they'd been in George Street, though everybody knew one of 'em had been at the windlass all day with the wages man, and the other two below, working up to their knees in water; for they'd come on a drift in their claim, and were puddling back. However, that says nothing; we were all in good clothes and fancy shirts and ties. Miners don't go about in their working suits. The two honourables walked over to the bar first of all, and said a word or two to Kate, who was all smiles and as pleasant as you please. It was one of her good days. Starlight put up his eyeglass and stared round as if we were all a lot of queer animals out of a caravan. Then he sat down and took up the *Turon Star*. Kate hardly looked at him she was so taken up with his

two friends, and, woman-like, bent on drawing them on, knowing them to be big swells in their own country. We never looked his way, except on the sly, and no one could have thought we'd ever slept under one tree together, or seen the things we had.

When the waiter was opening their wine one of the camp officers comes in that they had letters to. So they asked him to join them, and Starlight sends for another bottle of Moselle—something like that, he called it.

"The last time I drank wine as good as this," says Starlight, "was at the Caffy Troy, something or other, in Paris. I wouldn't mind being there again, with the Variety Opera to follow. Would you, Clifford?"

"Well, I don't know," says the other swell. "I find this amazing good fun for a bit. I never was in such grand condition since I left Oxford. This eight-hours' shift business is just the right thing for training. I feel fit to go for a man's life. Just feel this, Despard?" and he holds out his arm to the camp swell. "There's muscle for you!"

"Plenty of muscle," said Mr. Despard, looking round. He was a swell that didn't work, and wouldn't work, and thought it fine to treat the diggers like dogs. Most of the commissioners and magistrates were gentlemen and acted as such; but there were a few young fools like this one, and they did the Government a deal of harm with the diggers more than they knew. "Plenty of muscle," says he, "but devilish little society."

"I don't agree with you," says the other honourable. "It's the most amusing and in a way instructive place for a man who wants to know his fellow-creatures I was ever in. I never pass a day without meeting some fresh *variety* of the human race, man or woman; and their

experiences are well worth knowing, I can tell you. Not that they're in a hurry to impart them; for that there's more natural, unaffected good manners on a digging than in any society I ever mingled in I shall never doubt. But when they see you don't want to patronize, and are content to be a simple man among men, there's nothing they won't do for you or tell you."

"Oh, d—n one's fellow-creatures; present company excepted," says Mr. Despard, filling his glass, "and the man that grew this 'tipple.' They're useful to me now and then, and one has to put up with this crowd; but I never could take much interest in them."

"All the worse for you, Despard," says Clifford. "You're wasting your chances—golden opportunities in every sense of the word. You'll never see such a spectacle as this, perhaps, again as long as you live. It's a fancy dress ball with real characters."

"Dashed bad characters, if we only knew," says Despard, yawning. "What do you say, Haughton?" looking at Starlight, who was playing with his glass and not listening much by the look of him.

"I say, let's go into the little parlour and have a game of picquet, unless you'll take some more wine. No? Then we'll move. Bad characters, you were saying? Well, you camp fellows ought to be able to give an opinion."

They sauntered through the big room, which was just then crowded with a curious company, as Clifford said. I suppose there was every kind of man and miner under the sun. Not many women, but what there was not a little out of the way in looks and manners. We kept on working away all the time. It helped to stop us from thinking, and every week we had a bigger deposit-receipt in the bank where we used to sell our gold. People may

say what they like, but there's nothing like a nest seeing it grow bigger keeps many a fellow straight, he gets to like adding to it, and feels the pull of l careful with his money, which a poor man that neve anything worth saving doesn't. Poor men are the extravagant I've always found. They spend all they which middling kind of people just above them They screw and pinch to bring up their children, what not; and dress shabby and go without a lot the working man never thinks of stinting himself in. there's the parson here to do that kind of thing. I'l the proper sort of cove to preach. I'd better leave him. So we didn't spend our money foolish, like part of the diggers that had a bit of luck; but we h do a fair thing. We got through a lot of money week, I expect. Talking of foolish things, I saw man that had his horse shod with gold, regular pure shoes. The blacksmith made 'em—good solid ones all regular. He rode into the main street one ho and no end of people stopped him and lifted u horse's feet to see. They weighed 7oz. 4dwt. each. bow ought to have been shod that way. If ever a deserved it he did. But Starlight didn't go in for kind of thing. Now and then some of the old co hands, when they were regularly "on the burst," empty a dozen of champagne into a bucket or light pipes with a ten-pound note. But these were not day larks, and were laughed at by the diggers selves as much as anybody.

But of course some allowance had to be mad men not making much above wages when they suddenly on a biggish stone, and sticking the pic it found it to be a gigantic nugget worth a small fo

Most men would go a bit mad over a stroke of luck like that, and they did happen now and then. There was the Boennair nugget, dug at Louisa Creek by an Irishman, that weighed 364oz. 11dwt. It was sold in Sydney for £1,156. There was the King of Meroo nugget, weighing 157oz.; and another one that only scaled 71oz. seemed hardly worth picking up after the others, only £250 worth or so. But there was a bigger one yet on the grass if we'd only known, and many a digger, and shepherd too, had sat down on it and lit his pipe, thinking it no better than other lumps of blind white quartz that lay piled up all along the crown of the ride.

Mostly after we'd done our day's work and turned out clean and comfortable after supper, smoking our pipes, we walked up the street for an hour or two. Jim and I used to laugh a bit in a queer way over the change it was from our old bush life at Rocky Flat when we were boys, before we had any thoughts beyond doing our regular day's work and milking the cows and chopping wood enough to last mother all day. The little creek, that sounded so clear in the still night when we woke up, rippling and gurgling over the stones, the silent, dark forest all round on every side; and on moonlight nights the moon shining over Nulla Mountain, dark and overhanging all the valley, as if it had been sailing in the clear sky over it ever since the beginning of the world. We didn't smoke then, and we used to sit in the verandah, and Aileen would talk to us till it was time to go to bed.

Even when we went into Bargo, or some of the other country towns, they did not seem so much brighter. Sleepy-looking, steady-going places they all were, with people crawling about them like a lot of old working

bullocks. Just about as sensible, many of 'em. What a change all this was! Main-street at the Turon! Just as bright as day at 12 o'clock at night. Crowds walking up and down, bars lighted up, theatres going on, dance-houses in full swing, billiard-tables where you could hear the balls clicking away till daylight; miners walking down to their night shifts, others turning out after sleeping all the afternoon quite fresh and lively; half-a-dozen troopers clanking down the street, back from escort duty. Everybody just as fresh at midnight as at breakfast time—more so, perhaps. It was a new world.

One thing's certain; Jim and I would never have had the chance of seeing as many different kinds of people in a hundred years if it hadn't been for the gold. I wonder some of the young fellows kicked over the traces for a change—a change from sheep, cattle, and horses, ploughing and reaping, shearing and bullock-driving; the same old thing every day; the same chaps to talk to, about the same things. It does seem a dead-and-alive kind of life after all we've seen and done since. However, we'd a deal better have kept to the bulldog's motter, "Hang on," and stick to it, even if it was a shade slow and stupid. We'd have come out right in the end, as all coves do that hold fast to the right thing and stick to the straight course, fair weather or foul. I can see that now, and many things else.

But to see the big room at the Prospectors' Arms at night—the hall they called it—was a sight worth talking about—as Jim and I walked up and down, or sat at one of the small tables smoking our pipes, with good liquor before us. It was like a fairy tale come true to chaps like us, though we had seen a little life in Sydney and Melbourne.

What made it so different from any other place we'd ever seen or thought of before was the strange mixture of every kind and sort of man and woman; to hear them all jabbering away together in different languages, or trying to speak English, used to knock us altogether. The American diggers that we took up with had met a lot of foreigners in California and other places. They could speak a little Spanish and French, and got on with them. But Jim and I could only stare and stand open-mouthed when a Spanish-American chap would come up with his red sash and his big sheath-knife, while they'd yabber away quite comfortable.

It made us feel like children, and we began to think what a fine thing it would be to clear out by Honolulu, and so on to San Francisco, as Starlight was always talking about. It would make men of us, at any rate, and give us something to think about in the days to come.

If we could clear out what a heaven it would be! I could send over for Gracey to come to me. I knew she'd do that, if I was only once across the sea, ready and willing to lead a new life, and with something honest-earned and hard-worked-for to buy a farm with. Nobody need know. Nobody would even inquire in the far West where we'd come from or what we'd done. We should live close handy to one another—Jim and Jeanie, Gracey and I—and when dad went under, mother and Aileen could come out to us; and there would still be a little happiness left us, for all that was come and gone. Ah! if things would only work out that way.

Well, more unlikely things happen every day. And still the big room gets fuller. There's a band strikes up in the next room and the dancing begins. This is a ball night. Kate has started that game. She's a great

hand at dancing herself, and she manages to get a few girls to come up; wherever they come from nobody knows, for there's none to be seen in the daytime. But they turn out wonderfully well dressed, and some of them mighty good-looking; and the young swells from the camp come down, and the diggers that have been lucky and begin to fancy themselves. And there's no end of fun and flirting and nonsense, such as there always is when men and women get together in a place where they're not obliged to be over-particular. Not that t' was any rowdiness or bad behaviour allowed. A f field is the wrong shop for that. Anyone that didn' have himself would have pretty soon found himsel his head in the street, and lucky if he came out with whole bones.

I once tried to count the different breeds and guages of the men in the big room one night. I stop at 30. There were Germans, Swedes, Danes, Norweg Russians, Italians, Greeks, Jews, Spaniards, French Maltese, Mexicans, Negroes, Indians, Chinamen, N Zealanders, English, Irish, Scotch, Welsh, Australi..., Americans, Canadians, Creoles, gentle and simple, farmers and labourers, squatters and shepherds, lawyers and doctors. They were all alike for a bit, all pretty rich; none poor, or likely to be; all workers and comrades; nobody wearing much better clothes or trying to make out he was higher than anybody else. Everybody was free with his money. If a fellow was sick or out of luck, or his family was down with fever, the notes came freely —as many as were wanted, and more when that was done. There was no room for small faults and vices; everything and everybody was worked on a high scale. *It was a* grand time—better than ever was in our country

before or since. Jim and I always said we felt better men while the flash time lasted, and hadn't a thought of harm or evil about us. We worked hard enough, too, as I said before; but we had good call to do so. Every week when we washed up we found ourselves a lot forrarder, and could see that if it held on like this for a few months more we should have made our "pile," as the diggers called it, and be able to get clear off without much bother.

Because it wasn't now as it was in the old times, when Government could afford to keep watch upon every vessel, big and little, that left the harbour. Now there was no end of trouble in getting sailors to man the ships, and we could have worked our passage easy enough; they'd have taken us and welcome, though we'd never handled a rope in our lives before. Besides that, there were hundreds of strangers starting for Europe and America by every vessel that left. Men who had come out to the colony expecting to pick up gold in the streets, and had gone home disgusted; lucky men, too, like ourselves, who had sworn to start for home the very moment they had made a fair thing. How were any police in the world to keep the run of a few men that had been in trouble before among such a mixed-up mob?

Now and then we managed to get a talk with Starlight on the sly. He used to meet us at a safe place by night, and talk it all over. He and his mates were doing well, and expected to be ready for a start in a few months, when we might meet in Melbourne and clear out together. He believed it would be easy, and said that our greatest danger of being recognized was now over—that we had altered so much by living and working among the diggers that we could pass for diggers anywhere.

"Why, we were all dining at the Commissioner's yesterday," he said, "when who should walk in but our old friend Goring. He's been made inspector now; and, of course, he's a great swell and a general favourite. The Commissioner knew his family at home, and makes no end of fuss about him. He left for the Southern district, I am glad to say. I felt queer, I must say; but, of course, I didn't show it. We were formally introduced. He caught me with that sudden glance of his—devilish sharp eyes, he has—and looks me full in the face.

"'I don't remember your name, Mr. Haughton,' said he; 'but your face seems familiar to me somehow. I can't think where I've met you before.'

"'Must have been at the Melbourne Club,' says I, pulling my moustache. 'Met a heap of Sydney people there.'

"'Perhaps so,' says he. 'I used to go and lunch there a good deal. I had a month's leave last month, just after I got my step. Curious it seems, too,' says he; 'I can't get over it.'

"'Fill your glass and pass the claret,' says the Commissioner. 'Faces are very puzzling things met in a different state of existence. Human repetends, as Marcus Clarke says. I don't suppose Haughton's wanted, eh, Goring?"

"This was held to be a capital joke, and I laughed too in a way that would have made my fortune on the stage. Goring laughed too, and seemed to fear he'd wounded my feelings, for he was most polite all the rest of the evening."

"Well, if *he* didn't smoke you," says Jim, "we're right till the Day of Judgment. There's no one else here *that's half* a ghost of a chance to swear to us."

"Except," says I—

"Oh! Kate?" says Jim; "never mind her. Jeanie's coming up to be married to me next month, and Kate's getting so fond of you again that there's no fear of her letting the cat out."

"That's the very reason. I never cared two straws about her, and now I hate the sight of her. She's a revengeful devil, and if she takes it into her head she'll turn on us some fine day as sure as we're alive."

"Don't you believe it," says Jim; "women are not so bad as all that." ("Are they not?" says Starlight.) "I'll go bail we'll be snug and safe here till Christmas, and then we'll give out, say we're going to Melbourne for a spree, and clear straight out."

END OF VOL. I.

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